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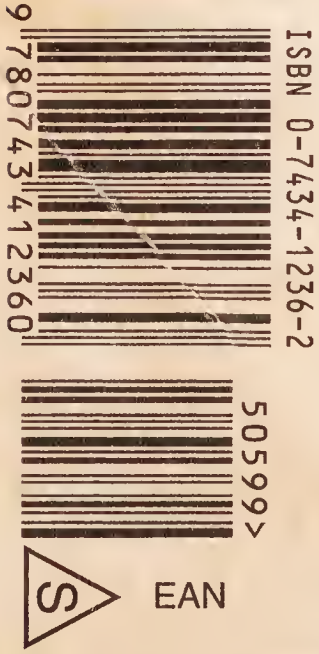

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"What's Phoebe got to do with anything?" Niall demanded.

"Is this all part of some elaborate ploy to get the Power of Three? Because it isn't going to work," Piper said angrily.

"The power of what? I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. He stood up and started for the door.

Prue made a flicking gesture with one hand. Niall flew backward, thudding into an armchair with such force that it skidded a few inches across the carpeted floor.

He gaped up at Prue, openmouthed. "Are you—are you a witch?"

"We're the most powerful witches around," Piper answered. "Believe me, you really don't want to get on our bad side. So I suggest you tell us what we want to know."

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THE LEGACY OF MERLIN

An original novel by Eloise Flood
Based on the hit TV series
created by Constance M. Burge

POCKET PULSE

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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POCKET PULSE published by
Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

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ISBN: 0-7434-1236-2

First Pocket Pulse printing April 2001

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CHAPTER 1

"Hey, look!" Phoebe Halliwell pressed her palms against the window of the airport minibus and stared out eagerly at the soft, rain-washed English countryside. "There's a ruined castle on that hilltop!" Her brown eyes gleamed. "I wonder what it's called."

"Relax, Phoebe," her oldest sister, Prue, said with a smile. "It's not Camelot."

"Are you sure, Prue?" Piper, the middle Halliwell sister, put on a mock-serious expression. "I could have sworn I just saw Lancelot riding in at the gate. I'd know that silver armor anywhere. And that helmet with the boar's head design."

"Oh, I know," Prue said. She closed her eyes and gave an exaggerated sigh of rapture. "I see

the knights of the Round Table in my dreams every night!"

"Funny. Very funny." Phoebe sat back in her seat and held up both hands, half exasperated, half amused. "So I'm a little hung up on Arthurian legends. Can I help it if my British folklore professor was really fantastic? Besides, this is where it all happened! I mean, the west of England, Wales—we're here, we're in the heart of Arthur's realm, you know? Can't you guys just feel the magic in the air?"

"I'm trying not to," Piper said dryly. "Vacation, remember?"

"Anyway, it's not the knights of the Round Table that I'm really interested in," Phoebe went on. "It's Merlin. He is such an intriguing character."

"I never knew you had a thing for older men, Phebes," Piper teased.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it." Phoebe shrugged. "Although maybe, if he were young and cute . . . Wouldn't it be perfect to have a boyfriend who really understood magic?"

"Phoebe!" Prue said, her ice-blue eyes widening. She jerked her head warningly at the minibus driver.

Phoebe cast a glance at him, but he didn't seem to be paying any attention. Anyway, they were sitting all the way in the back of the minibus, and there were no other passengers to

overhear them. Speaking openly seemed safe enough—not that she had said anything dangerous. Prue had a tendency to be overcautious.

To be fair, though, Phoebe had to admit that Prue had good reason to be wary. All the Halliwell sisters did. They had a major secret to protect: They were witches.

In fact, Phoebe, Prue, and Piper were three of the most powerful witches in history—the Charmed Ones. They were descended from a long line of witches dedicated to fighting the forces of darkness. And since the day they'd found out about their incredible powers, they had been stalked by the agents of darkness—warlocks, demons, and other things that were even worse.

"Coming into Hay-on-Wye now, ladies," the minibus driver called, snapping Phoebe out of her reverie. "Ahead on your left, that's what's left of Hay Castle. The original was built by the Lady Matilda of Hay back in the thirteenth century. They do say she was a giantess and could hurl great boulders farther than the eye could see, and that she ate anyone as displeased her." He spoke in a perfect deadpan voice.

"Excellent!" Phoebe gazed at the town with delight, taking in the narrow streets and the tightly packed, ancient-looking buildings.

"I've got to admit, you just don't find legends like that back home in San Francisco," Prue murmured. She brushed back her long, thick black

hair. "I wonder where Evan Rhys's bookshop is. I've got an appointment with him in"—she glanced at her watch—"three hours. He has a medieval book of hours that may be what I'm looking for."

"You're starting work already?" Piper exclaimed. "Wow, you don't waste any time, do you? I kind of figured we could relax on our first day here, maybe walk around town and do the tourist thing."

"You two can," Prue said. "This is a vacation for you. But I'm here on an assignment, remember? I'm getting paid to find books for Lloyd Claiborne."

"You know Prue," Phoebe told Piper. "Business before pleasure." She gave Prue a crooked grin. Sometimes she wished she had a little more of her oldest sister's drive. Prue always seemed to know exactly how to get wherever she was going in life. Me, I'm still trying to figure out where I *am*, Phoebe thought. And I'm the witch with the visions!

The minibus pulled up in front of a pretty ivy-draped brick building near the center of town. "The Trelawney Hotel," the driver announced.

The girls piled out. Piper paid him, and then they quickly checked in and went up to their suite. It was lovely, with sheer white curtains and wallpaper dotted with tiny flowers. The bedroom contained a big double bed, and there

was a wrought-iron daybed in the sitting room. Phoebe sat down on it and bounced experimentally.

"Perfect! I'll sleep in here." She broke into a grin. "Thanks to Lloyd Claiborne. Prue, how do you luck into these rich clients? I can't believe he's putting you up in a suite. And this hotel is so elegant!"

"What can I say? He's got style." Reaching into her suitcase, Prue pulled out a cosmetics bag. "Okay. As the one who got us this great vacation, I call the first shower. See you two in a few." She flashed her sisters a smile over her shoulder. "I'll try not to use up all the hot water. But this is England, after all, so I'm not making any promises."

Fortunately, the Trelawney had plenty of hot water. An hour and a half later, the three sisters headed out, clean and refreshed. Prue had on a blue linen tank dress, while Piper and Phoebe wore jeans and halter tops. Phoebe had woven a section of her hair into tiny braids bound with colorful beads. Piper had pulled her straight, silky brown hair back in a ponytail.

It was a gorgeous June day. The Halliwells ate lunch in a crowded outdoor café facing the Marketplace, the spot where Hay-on-Wye's weekly outdoor market was held.

"There sure are a lot of used bookstores here," Piper commented as they lingered over iced coffee. "We must have passed ten on the

way here—and the hotel is only three blocks away."

"Well, Hay is one of the world centers for antiquarian books," Prue replied. "There's a lot of junk here, but the town is also one of the premier places for serious collectors."

"There's a neat-looking place over there," Phoebe added, pointing at a shop with a huge multipaned picture window across the cobbled square from them. Her gaze sharpened as she read the name on the awning. "Caer Wydyr? Oh, that's just too cool!"

She turned eagerly to her sisters, then noted their blank looks. "In Celtic mythology, Caer Wydyr is the name of Merlin's castle," she explained. "Supposedly he built it out of some kind of magical glass. It was where he kept all his books of magic lore. Sounds like a pretty interesting bookshop, no?"

"Mmm," Piper said with a sigh. "Here we go again with the Arthurian stuff."

Prue glanced at her watch. "Well, I'd better get going," she said. "My appointment is in fifteen minutes. Anyone want to tag along? I hear Rhys's shop is one of the best."

"I'll come," Piper said, getting to her feet.

Phoebe shook her head so that her tiny braids danced. "Not me. I'll meet you guys back at the hotel later. I want to check out Caer Wydyr."

A tiny, concerned line appeared between Prue's dark eyebrows. "Okay, Phoebe," she

said. "But if it is a shop that specializes in magic books, just . . . be cool, all right? You never know what kind of people you'll run into in a place like that."

Phoebe laughed. Sometimes Prue took things a little too seriously. "Don't worry," she said. Standing up, she brushed a few crumbs off her lap. "I'm just browsing. What could possibly happen?"

Piper and Prue looked at each other. "Famous last words!" they groaned in unison.

"It would be vintage Phoebe to find some weird book of black magic in there and call up a demon or something," Prue grumbled as she and Piper walked along.

"She'll be okay," Piper said absently. "She's more sensible than she seems."

"I know, I know. Actually, I'm more concerned about you." Prue gave Piper a sideways glance. "You've been awfully quiet all day. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just—" Piper sighed, searching for the words to express her feelings.

"Let me guess," Prue said gently. "Leo?"

Piper sighed again. "Mmm-hmm. Leo. It all started bubbling up again when Phoebe said it would be great to have a boyfriend who understands magic." She gave a short laugh. "Take it from me, it doesn't make things perfect."

Leo, Piper's boyfriend, definitely understood

magic. He had first come into her life when he did some repairs to their house in San Francisco. But it had turned out that he was much more than just a handyman; he was a White Lighter, a kind of guardian angel whose mission was to protect good people—and good witches—from the forces of darkness.

"I try and I try, but I just can't get used to this whole coming-second-to-his-work thing." Piper paused for a minute as they overtook an elderly man walking a spaniel. "I mean, I totally accept that what he does is really important," she went on as soon as they were out of earshot. "It's just that I can't help resenting it when he has to whoosh off in the middle of dinner or . . . or other stuff." Her cheeks grew warm. "You know what I mean. Or when I have to worry because I know he's facing some powerful Dark Lighter and he could be in real danger, and I might never see him again. And then I feel guilty for being so selfish, and then I resent him for making me feel guilty."

She clamped her lips together, frustrated, then glanced up at Prue. Prue was gazing at her with one eyebrow raised. "Well, you did ask," she mumbled.

Prue laughed and slung an arm around Piper's shoulders. "I did ask. And I really wanted to know. But I think you're being a little silly. I mean, the most important thing is that you love Leo, and he adores you. You don't

have any doubt about that, do you? Because, FYI, he does. Totally."

"I know." Piper nodded, feeling foolish. "I know."

"Here we are," Prue said. She pushed open the door and stepped into the cool, dim interior of Evan Rhys, Inc. Piper followed. She inhaled deeply, letting the musty scent of old leather fill her nostrils.

"This could take an hour or so," Prue told Piper. "But afterward I'll be free for the rest of the day. Let's go shopping—for clothes, I mean. Deal?"

"Deal!" Piper grinned. As Prue headed off to the back of the shop, Piper wandered down one of the aisles, gazing at the racks of books. The ones in this aisle all seemed to be Victorian.

Piper pulled one off the shelf at random. It was called *Wild Flowers of the Wye Valley*, by Percy P. Throckmorton. Piper began paging idly through it. It was filled with beautiful pen-and-ink drawings.

"Excuse me," a voice said at Piper's elbow. She glanced up. A stocky, balding man in a brown tweed jacket stood next to her, peering nearsightedly at the shelf. He reached up and took down a book called *The Care and Nurture of Roses*. Piper noticed that it was also by Percy P. Throckmorton.

She smiled and held up her wildflower book. "I guess this Throckmorton guy knew a lot about flowers, huh?" she said.

"Eh?" the man said. He squinted at the book

in Piper's hand. "Oh, er—yes. He taught botany at the local college, you know. Bit of an eccentric, from what I hear, but a sound man on roses, very. Can't think why he bothered with that wildflower rubbish, though." He shook his head disapprovingly. "Weeds, just common weeds. Hoom, hahm." He made a noise as if he were clearing his throat.

"Really? Some of these drawings are quite beautiful," Piper said.

"Hoom, hahm, well . . ." The man looked relieved when one of the shop assistants bustled up to him.

"Sir Andrew, I've got that book on leaf blight you were looking for," she said. "It's up at the counter."

"Ah, excellent. Good show. Lead on, lead on," Sir Andrew said, rubbing his hands. He turned to Piper. "Er—good day."

"Take care," Piper said. She grinned as she watched him go. She'd never met anyone who was quite so much like the stereotype of the British country squire.

She turned a few more pages in the wildflower book. She was about to put it back on the shelf when a chapter heading caught her eye: "Posies and Other Love Charms."

Intrigued, she skimmed a few paragraphs. Apparently, there had been quite a craze for making love charms out of bouquets, or posies, of different types of wildflowers. There was a

whole science to it. If you wanted your husband to be faithful, you used a particular combination of flowers; if you wanted to make a shy lover more passionate, you used different flowers; and so on. According to the tradition, all you had to do was get your man to smell the posy, and then the charm would take effect and he'd be putty in your hands.

Hmm. Maybe I should try one of these posy things on Leo, Piper mused. A smile crept across her lips. Wouldn't it be great if he were putty in my hands for a change?

Not that she actually expected a posy to work, of course. It seemed pretty unlikely that Percy P. Throckmorton had really known anything about magic, but it might be fun to have a project. Prue was going to be working for most of the week, and it seemed as if Phoebe was totally caught up in this Arthurian stuff. So maybe Piper needed something to do by herself. And hunting for these wildflowers would be a great way to explore the countryside around Hay-on-Wye.

I'll do it, Piper decided. She took the book up to the register and paid for it. "Would you tell my sister that I'll meet her back at the hotel?" she asked the clerk.

Then she headed outside to find a sunny spot to read.

Phoebe had to admit that she was out of her depth. She picked up a hefty leather-bound

tome and squinted at the title. " *'Commentarius de Praecipuis Divinationum Generibus . . .'* " she read, sounding out the Latin words under her breath. *Divinationum* sounded like divination, or the power to see the future—Phoebe's own power. But other than that, she didn't have a clue what the book was about.

She glanced around the bookstore, hoping someone could translate for her. But the place was silent and deserted. Even the clerk had disappeared. Dust motes shimmered in the afternoon sun that slanted through the windows. Against the far wall, a grandfather clock ticked loudly.

Phoebe craned her neck. The only other person she could see was a guy in the next aisle. He looked about her own age, with long black hair pulled back in a ponytail and black leather pants. Phoebe had noticed him when she came in—it was hard not to notice him, the way those pants clung to his long, muscular thighs and the way he moved, with a certain catlike grace. But she didn't think a rock-star type like him would be much help with a Latin translation. He was probably even more at sea here than she was.

She picked up a slightly newer-looking book. *"De Præstigiis et Incantationibus Dæmonum et Necromanticorum,"* she read. She blew out her breath, frustrated. "Oh, great. Didn't any of these people write in English?"

She'd come into Caer Wydyr with high

hopes. An antiquarian bookstore devoted specifically to books about magic—what could be better? Phoebe was hungry for knowledge about the secret world she and her sisters were now part of, but it was so hard to sift through all the fluff and bogus information.

The only book Phoebe had ever come across that had really told her anything significant was *The Book of Shadows*, the huge, magical volume of spells handed down from mother to daughter in her family. It was the record of the accumulated wisdom of Phoebe's ancestors. Invaluable as *The Book of Shadows* was, though, it didn't tell her everything she wanted to know. It didn't give her a sense of witchcraft in the world, of its scope and history.

But it doesn't look like I'm going to learn much here, she thought. Not if I can't read any of the books!

She turned to put *De Præstigiis* back on the shelf. As she did, she overbalanced and lurched slightly. The big, heavy book began to slide out of her hands. Phoebe clutched frantically at it. The pages splayed open, and a folded fragment of what looked like parchment fluttered out from the middle of the book.

Phoebe managed to catch the book and close it without tearing any of the fragile old pages. She set it back on the shelf, then knelt to pick up the bit of parchment.

But as her fingers closed on the brownish scrap,

another hand shot down and snatched it. Startled, Phoebe glanced up—and found herself face-to-face with the man in the black leather pants.

Phoebe caught her breath. His face was only inches from hers. His eyes were gray-blue, the color of the ocean after a storm. His gaze bored into hers, insistent, fierce.

For a moment they crouched there, frozen. How come I didn't hear him coming? Phoebe thought stupidly.

Then she felt him tugging on the parchment. The action broke the spell. "Careful, you'll rip it!" she said.

"I need it!" He tugged again, harder. To her alarm, Phoebe felt the brittle parchment start to crumble under her fingers.

She let it go. "Okay, okay, I guess you win," she said, irked. "You should be more careful. Haven't you ever heard of 'you break it, you buy it'?"

He didn't reply. He was scanning the parchment intently. Then he let it drop to the floor. His face was full of despair.

Phoebe stared at him. What could be so important about an old piece of parchment? Forgetting her irritation, she placed a hand on his arm. "Hey, are you—" she began.

She was going to say "okay?" but she never got that far. The vision came swiftly, suddenly, jerking her backward with the force of its arrival.

Wind, whipping across a gray, desolate moor. A man—this man—but wearing strange drab, shapeless clothes and a shaggy fur cloak.

He stood with his back to the wind, sheltering something in his arms. A child—a baby so new it still had that wet, mottled look. Its eyes were open, though. It gazed up the man, and he gazed down at it. His face was turned away from Phoebe, so that she couldn't see his expression.

And Phoebe, watching them both, felt a wave of love so strong it nearly took her breath away. Love—and deep, wrenching loss. Because wherever this man and this child were, she couldn't reach them.

The vision faded. Gradually the bookshop swam into focus again—the long, dusty wooden shelves lined with books, the dim globe lamps that hung from the ceiling. Hazily, Phoebe noticed that the black-haired man was staring at her with a look of puzzlement.

Then everything started to go dark again, as if she was entering a tunnel. Phoebe had time to wonder why the man's eyes suddenly widened with alarm.

Then she pitched forward, fainting.

CHAPTER 2

There was a roaring in Phoebe's ears. She was vaguely aware of strong arms catching her as she fell. But everything seemed so far away.

Gradually the roaring lessened. The room began to seem lighter again.

Phoebe found herself sitting on a small stepladder, leaning forward so that her head was between her knees. She glanced up and saw the plump, middle-aged shop clerk staring down at her with a worried expression. Next to her stood the man with the long black hair.

At the sight of him, Phoebe's vision flooded back into her mind. Her heartbeat speeded up. What had it meant? Who was he? Who was that baby? Could it possibly have been . . . hers?

Theirs? Was that what all those emotions she'd felt were telling her?

Calm down, she warned herself. Take it slowly!

"She just fell down in a faint," the man was saying to the shop clerk. Phoebe noticed that his accent had a soft burr in it, but she couldn't place it.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked Phoebe. "Shall I ring for a doctor?"

"No, no," Phoebe said quickly. "I'm fine. I just felt kind of dizzy for a moment. I think it must be jet lag." She smiled reassuringly.

"Jet lag?" the man with the long black hair repeated.

"Yeah, you know. When you fly to a different time zone and your body clock gets all out of whack," Phoebe said. "Why—do you call it something else over on this side of the Atlantic?"

"I—I—" The man seemed flustered.

"No, we call it jet lag, too," the clerk said with a laugh. "Why don't I just make you a quick cup of tea, then? It'll pick you right up." She bustled off before Phoebe could protest.

Alone with the black-haired man, Phoebe suddenly felt nervous. She licked her lips. "So, uh—thanks for catching me," she ventured. She cringed internally as she heard the inane words. Ooooh, that was smooth!

She stood up. "I'm Phoebe Halliwell," she

added, sticking out her hand. "I'm an American—but I guess you already figured that out, huh?"

He gave a sudden, boyish grin. "Well, I'm not from around here myself," he confided. "I'm Niall. Niall Oldman. And I am delighted to meet a fellow stranger." He took her outstretched hand and, instead of shaking it, pressed it lightly to his lips.

At his touch, Phoebe's heartbeat sped up again, but for a different reason this time. He sure is attractive, she found herself thinking. Normally, she would have found a flamboyant gesture like that kiss a little silly. But when Niall did it, somehow it seemed entirely natural.

She took a deep breath. "So, what brings you to Hay-on-Wye?" she asked, trying to ignore the flutters in her stomach.

"I have business with this place," he replied. Phoebe frowned at his odd phrasing. Then he glanced at her almost shyly. "Mixed with pleasure, at the moment."

Phoebe couldn't help smiling. "Are you a book dealer?" she asked.

Bong! The grandfather clock on the far wall began to chime. Niall glanced at it, then back at Phoebe.

"I must go," he said in a regretful voice. "I have people to meet. I wish I hadn't."

"Oh." Phoebe spoke lightly, trying to quell her sudden, sharp disappointment. "Well, thanks again for catching me."

"It was my pleasure," he told her. His gaze lingered on hers. "I really mean that."

He turned to go. Stop him! Phoebe told herself. Don't just let him walk out!

"Hey. Would you, um, would you have dinner with me tonight?" she called after him.

He turned, raising an eyebrow. "You're a forward girl." Then a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I like it."

Phoebe laughed out loud. "Well, at least one of us has some guts. Pick me up at the Trelawney Hotel at seven, okay?"

He sketched a quick bow. "I'll be there." Then he left.

This is all just too weird, Phoebe thought. She was still gazing after him, mentally replaying her vision, when the shop clerk hurried out from behind a curtain with a steaming mug of tea. "Here you are," she said, pressing the mug into Phoebe's hand. "Drink it. It'll put the pink back in your cheeks." She paused and peered at Phoebe's face. "Well, now, I see the pink's already back. Feeling better, are you?"

"I feel fine," Phoebe replied. She shook her head as if to clear it. "I think."

Late that afternoon Prue strolled down the street, heading back toward the hotel. She'd stopped and bought a cold bottle of white wine at a little shop. A glass of wine and a bath before dinner, she thought. Sounds perfect!

It had been a long and tiring day, but she was pleased with the progress she'd made. She'd had another meeting after her shopping break with Piper. Then she'd spent a long time browsing in the town's many bookshops. She'd bought a book for Lloyd Claiborne, and more importantly, she'd contacted two dealers who could probably lead her to some real finds.

Prue was about a block from the hotel when she caught sight of a fruit stand. It sat at the corner of a crooked lane lined with neat little houses. The hand-lettered sign that hung off the folding card table read "Homegrown fruit and veg. Blodwen Jeffries, prop." At the end of the day, there wasn't much produce left, but still, the scent of ripe strawberries drifted through the air and made Prue's mouth water, even from several yards away.

She smiled at the white-haired woman who sat next to it—Blodwen Jeffries herself, presumably. "Those strawberries smell so good!"

"Right out of my own little bit of garden," the old lady said proudly. "I picked them just this morning. Go ahead, try one." She held out a wooden carton to Prue.

Prue picked up one of the ripe berries and popped it into her mouth. It was sweet and tangy and delicious.

"Wow," she said. "The taste reminds me of summer evenings when I was little. My mother used to bake this incredible strawberry-rhubarb

pie." She felt a little pang as the memory hit her. Her mother had died before Prue was even ten years old. The official story was that she drowned in a swimming accident, but Prue knew better. Her mother had really been killed by a demon.

"That pie sounds lovely, dear," the old lady said. "I used to make an angel cake with strawberries and whipped cream on top. Owen—that was my husband—used to say, 'Blodwen, your angel cake could tempt the devil himself.' " She sighed. "But since I lost Owen, there hasn't been anyone to make it for."

"Oh. I'm so sorry," Prue said softly.

"Ah, well. He's been gone almost two years now," Blodwen Jeffries said. "You get used to it." She smoothed the collar of her striped blouse and gave Prue a smile. "Now, dear, can I sell you any strawberries?"

Prue hesitated. Their hotel suite did have a minibar with a refrigerator. And the strawberries were so good. . . .

"I'll take one of these small containers," she decided. "My sisters love strawberries almost as much as I do. I'm sure we'll finish them off in five minutes."

"Well, when you want more, come see me. I'm here every day, rain or shine," Mrs. Jeffries said. "And there'll be cherries in a day or two. My tree is loaded down this year." She turned and pointed down the lane to a whitewashed

cottage surrounded by a high brick wall. "You can see it from here," she added proudly.

Prue looked. She could see the upper branches of a smallish tree over the top of the wall, but she couldn't have said whether it was a cherry tree or a chestnut tree. "I'll take your word for it," she said, laughing. "And I'll be waiting for those cherries. See you!"

"Lovely chatting with you, dear," Mrs. Jeffries called as Prue walked off.

Prue was still smiling as she entered the lobby of the Trelawney Hotel. She skipped up the stairs and threw open the door to the suite she was sharing with Piper and Phoebe.

She paused in the doorway, taking in the scene that met her eyes. Piper was lounging on the daybed, watching Phoebe, who stood in front of the full-length mirror, frowning at her reflection. She wore a clingy blue slip-skirt and an acid green cropped top. Clothes were strewn all over the room.

"Hey!" Prue greeted her sisters. "What have you two been up to all afternoon? And what happened to this room? Did our suitcases explode or something?" Her eyes narrowed as she took in Phoebe's footwear. "Aren't those my sandals?"

"They're the only ones that work with this skirt," Phoebe explained. "I didn't think you'd mind. You don't, do you?"

"You aren't going to believe this, Prue," Piper

put in. "While you've been working hard all day, and I've been improving my mind"—she held up a slim book called *Wildflowers of the Wye Valley*—"Phoebe here has been honing both her dating and her witching skills. She met a guy in a bookstore and had a vision of him holding her baby. She thinks he's Mr. Right."

"What?" Prue demanded.

"I didn't say that, Piper," Phoebe protested. "I said he might be. You can say that about any guy before you've gone out with him. Anyway, I'm not sure it was my baby. Although I did feel that, you know, maternal urge thing when I saw it. And it did kind of look like me, now that I think about—"

"Hold it. Hold everything." Closing the door carefully behind her, Prue stepped into the room. "Will someone please tell me what's going on?" As Piper and Phoebe both started to talk at once, she held up her hands. "One at a time. From the beginning. And in full sentences, please."

"Okay, here's what happened," Phoebe began. "See, I was in Caer Wydyr, that magic bookshop, and I saw this guy. . . ."

As Phoebe described how she'd tussled over some piece of parchment with this man and how she'd had a powerful vision when she touched his arm, Prue began to feel more and more alarmed. Was it really a chance meeting?

In her experience, there was no such thing as

coincidence. Not when you were one of the Charmed Ones. There were too many beings out there trying to destroy the sisters, either to steal their powers or just to get rid of such a powerful force for the good.

"Anyway," Phoebe was saying, "I couldn't just let him walk out of my life. Not without finding out what my vision was all about." She shrugged. "So I asked him to dinner. He's picking me up at seven."

Prue's mouth fell open. Trust Phoebe to be so reckless. "Phoebe, you don't know anything about him!" she protested.

"Yes, I do. He's a good guy. I can tell," Phoebe declared. "I felt it in my vision. Whatever else is going on with him, I really don't think he means me any harm." She gave Prue a pleading look. "Come on, Prue. I have good instincts about this kind of thing."

Prue blew out her breath, frustrated. "I know you do, Phoebe. It's just . . ."

Piper glanced at her watch. Her eyes widened. "Did you say seven?" she asked. "Because that's—"

A knock sounded on the door.

"Now," Piper finished. "Nice to know he's punctual."

Phoebe's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, no! I'm not finished dressing. And this room is a wreck!"

"You look great," Piper assured her. "As for the room—"

"Forget the room!" Prue snapped. "I just want to check this guy out. Someone has to make sure he's safe." She strode to the door and threw it open.

The man who faced her was extremely good-looking, that she had to admit. Not exactly her type—she liked them a little less flamboyant—but definitely very sexy. Just over six feet tall, with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail . . . broad shoulders, narrow hips . . . chiseled cheekbones . . . a slightly hawklike nose. . . .

It doesn't mean a thing, she reminded herself. Evil can look very attractive on the outside.

She stepped to the side to let him in. "I'm Prue Halliwell," she said coolly. "Phoebe's big sister."

Phoebe came forward and took his arm. "She looks tough, but she's really a softie. Don't let her scare you," she told him. She gestured at Piper. "That's my other sister, Piper. Prue, Piper, this is Niall Oldman. Okay, introductions complete. Niall, shall we—"

"Wait a minute!" Prue could see that Phoebe was trying to avoid the third degree. But she wasn't going to get away that easily.

"What's your hurry?" Prue asked. "I've got a bottle of wine. Why don't we all have a drink before you two go?"

"Lovely!" Niall said immediately. He took a seat on the daybed. Phoebe threw Prue a warning look, then sat beside him.

Prue opened the bottle while Piper brought glasses over from the minibar. "So, Niall, where are you from?" Prue asked casually as she poured the wine into the glasses.

"Oh, a bit southwest of here," Niall said. "A little town you've never heard of."

"I see." Well, that was nice and evasive, Prue thought. "And what are you doing here in Hay?"

Niall gave her a bland, amiable smile. "Research. I'm a scholar, actually. Of Arthurian legends."

"You're kidding!" Phoebe burst out. Her eyes shone with delight as she turned to Piper and Prue. "Is this fate or what?"

Or what indeed, Prue thought. How convenient is it that he specializes in the exact subject that Phoebe's so gaga about?

"And you?" Niall asked her. "Do you . . . work?"

Prue almost choked on her wine. "D-do I work?" she stuttered. What kind of chauvinistic question was that? "Of course I do. You sound as if you don't approve."

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" He seemed genuinely surprised. "I think it's wonderful to see women doing so much."

Weird, Prue thought. Something is off here.

"Prue is a freelance antiques dealer," Phoebe put in quickly. She shot Prue an anxious look. "She's here buying books for a client back home."

"So where are you staying?" Piper asked him.

"On the Oxford Road," Niall replied. "With a friend."

"And how long do you plan to be here?" Prue put in.

He shrugged. "A few days. Until my business is done."

"Okay. Are you satisfied now?" Phoebe asked Prue wryly. She set down her glass and got to her feet. "Niall, please forgive my sister for giving you the third degree. Since our mom died, she's kind of gone into maternal overdrive. She can't help herself."

Niall laughed. "I didn't mind at all. I like sisters who look out for one another. But I am a bit hungry." He offered Prue a friendly, amused look. "All that questioning wore me out."

Prue smiled stiffly, embarrassed.

"Let's go," Phoebe said, taking Niall's arm. She glanced at Prue and Piper. "Don't wait up for me!"

After the door closed behind them, Prue turned to Piper. "I don't like this. I have a bad feeling about him."

"Prue," Piper said. She put a gentle hand on her sister's arm. "I know you're just looking out for Phoebe, but I have to say I think you're overreacting. I mean, you heard what Phoebe said about her vision. She felt love in it. Her visions may be kind of cryptic sometimes, but they don't lie."

"I know. But what if she's misinterpreting it?" Prue argued. "What if the love she felt was for the baby and not for Niall at all? It could easily have been a vision of him stealing her baby. That would explain why she had that feeling of loss."

Piper took another sip of wine. "You might be right. But, first of all, Phoebe didn't mention any sense of menace or threat in her vision. You'd think she would have felt that if Niall was stealing her baby."

"That's true," Prue conceded. "But—"

"And second," Piper went on, holding up a finger for silence, "whatever Phoebe's vision means, it's way in the future. I mean, I'm pretty sure she's not planning on having kids anytime soon. So we have a little time to see where things are going, don't you think?"

Prue crossed her arms over her chest. What Piper said made sense. Maybe she was overreacting.

"I hope you're right," she said at last. "Because I really don't want to have to battle any demons this week!"

"I don't believe it," Phoebe said. She stared at Niall in shock. "I just figured out your deep, dark secret."

"You did?" Niall looked taken aback. "What is it?"

Phoebe leaned across the table and aimed an

accusing finger at him. "You've never eaten Indian food before, have you? Come on, admit it!"

Niall burst out laughing. "I'm sorry to say, it's true," he said, spooning the last piece of tandoori lamb onto his plate. "I am a terrible country bumpkin. I was hoping I could fool you, but you are obviously a woman of the world." He popped the lamb into his mouth and chewed it with gusto. "Will it help my cause at all if I tell you that, now that I've tried it, I love it?"

Phoebe pretended to consider. "Well, at least it shows that you have natural good taste," she told him.

A waiter came to clear away their dishes. Propping her elbows on the table, Phoebe cupped her chin in her hands and studied Niall in the candlelight.

He was a strange bundle of contradictions, she thought. So knowledgeable about some things, and so ignorant about others. For example, how could you live in England all your life and never have eaten Indian food? It was like living in San Francisco and never having been to Chinatown.

And then there was television. Niall didn't get any of her TV references. While it was true that the British did have their own programs, Phoebe had just assumed that everyone knew about certain cultural landmarks, like *Star Trek*. But when she'd mentioned that one of the wait-

ers looked like Mr. Spock, Niall had just stared blankly at her. "Sorry," he'd said when she explained about the show. "I must have missed that one."

It's because he's one of those scholarly types, Phoebe decided. He's always reading. He probably never even turns his TV on.

He sat back in his chair and stretched. Phoebe tried unsuccessfully to keep her eyes off his broad chest. Then again, she mused, he obviously finds time to work out!

Niall laid down his napkin. "It's a beautiful night," he said. "Will you walk by the river with me?"

Phoebe's heartbeat sped up. "I'd love to."

They paid the check and headed out. The restaurant was only a short walk away from the broad, meandering River Wye. Moonlight made little silver crescents on its placid waters.

They strolled slowly along the footpath. "So tell me the scoop on King Arthur," Phoebe said. "Was he real?"

"Oh, he was real, all right," Niall said. "And he really did have a round table and a castle—well, really more of a fortress—called Camelot. But otherwise, there's not much in the popular stories that's true. All that nonsense about knights and jousting and chivalry—it's just silly. That sort of thing didn't even exist during Arthur's time. It came hundreds of years later. Arthur was no knight

in shining armor. He didn't even know how to ride a horse."

Phoebe felt a little crestfallen. "Oh. Well, what about Merlin?" she asked. "Did he really exist, or is he made up, too?"

"He existed," Niall said firmly. "Definitely. He was Arthur's most trusted adviser in the early years."

"And do you think he was really a . . . you know . . . a magician?" Phoebe asked. She held her breath a little. Niall's answer might give her an idea what he thought of the whole concept of magic.

Niall gave a short laugh. "You mean, did he dress up in a pointed hat and turn people into frogs with his wand? No. Merlin was something much more serious than that. He was a Druid—someone who practiced the old magic, the magic of oak, ash, and thorn. The magic of the standing stones. Merlin was the greatest of the Druids. His power was unrivaled."

Phoebe felt a thrill of excitement run through her. He believes, she thought. He really believes what he's saying. He accepts magic as real.

Niall suddenly grinned down at her, his teeth flashing white in the moonlight. "That's what I think, anyway. But it's hard to be sure. After all, this was fifteen hundred years ago."

"Right." They walked in silence for a moment. Then Phoebe's hand accidentally brushed against Niall's fingers.

The contact was electric. Her hand felt as if it were on fire. Phoebe stopped in her tracks, her pulse hammering. She raised her eyes to his. Does he feel it, too? she wondered. Does he want to touch me as badly as I want to touch him?

Her unspoken questions were answered in the next instant, as Niall slowly reached out to her. Cupping her face in both hands, he bent his head and began to kiss her.

Phoebe felt as if she were drowning. Her pulse roared in her ears. Every inch of her skin tingled, so that she shivered as if chilled. In response, his arms came around her waist and he pressed her into the warmth of his body. His hands roamed up and down, stroking her hair, caressing her back.

The kiss went on and on. She was the one who finally broke away, her breathing ragged. She stared at him. I've never been kissed like that before, she thought. Never. And I don't think he has, either. He looks pretty dazed.

Am I falling in love with him?

Suddenly everything was moving too fast for her. "I—I think I'd better go now," she said.

"Ah, no, Phoebe, don't go. I—" Niall broke off. Then he nodded. "All right. But—can I see you again? Tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night," Phoebe agreed.

She turned and fled back to her hotel.

CHAPTER 3

Piper spread some marmalade on her last piece of toast and bit into it. "Mmm," she said happily.

Prue nodded. "The English do a good breakfast. So, what do you two have planned for today?"

Piper swallowed her toast. "Well, there's a tour of Hay Castle at eleven. Want to go, Phebes?"

No answer. Phoebe was staring out the window of the hotel restaurant, crumbling a piece of dry toast with her fingers. Her cappuccino sat untouched in front of her. The foam was gone, and a skin had formed on top.

Piper waved her hand in front of her younger sister's face. "Phebes?"

Phoebe gave a start of surprise. "Huh? What?"

"I was asking if you wanted to take the castle tour," Piper said. She smiled. "You're quiet this morning."

"Was the date that bad?" Prue added. Phoebe had come in after Prue and Piper were asleep the night before, so they hadn't heard the details yet.

Phoebe's cheeks turned slightly pink. "Actually," she said, "it was that good. I'm seeing him again tonight." She looked down at her plate, then back up again. "I think . . . I think I could be falling in love with him."

"Wow!" Piper said, taken aback. She glanced at Prue and winced at the gathering frown she saw. "After one date? He must really be something."

"He is," Phoebe agreed. "He's incredible. Are you ready for this?" She leaned forward. "He actually believes in magic!"

Piper put a hand to her forehead. Oh, no!

"He what?" Prue's blue eyes blazed. "Phoebe, don't tell me you talked to him about magic. I can't believe you would do something so dumb!"

"Would you relax? Of course I didn't say anything about us or our powers," Phoebe said impatiently. "I was asking him about Merlin, and he said Merlin was the greatest of the Druids. Something about the magic of the

standing stones." Her eyes softened. "It wasn't what he said, so much as the way he said it. I could tell he really believed."

"Or that he knew it was what you wanted to hear," Prue shot back. "Phoebe, the guy is playing you! Can't you see that?"

"I don't think—" Piper began.

"No, he isn't!" Phoebe snapped, cutting her off. "Prue, don't do this to me!"

"Guys—" Piper tried again.

"Do what?" Prue's voice rose. "Try to stop you from doing something incredibly stupid?"

The other breakfasters were starting to turn and look at them. "Hey!" Piper slapped both her hands down on the table. "You both need to calm down. Now!

"You're both being stupid," she went on in a quieter voice as they turned to her in surprise. "Phoebe, you've got to be more careful. Even if he seems totally clueless about who and what we are, you can't take any chances. You're putting us all in danger—if not from him, then from someone else. You know how evil has a way of finding us."

"Right!" Prue began. "That's what I—"

Piper reached over and put a hand over her mouth. "And, Prue, you have to stop jumping the gun," she went on. "So far we have no reason to believe that Niall is anything but what he says he is. And there is the evidence of Phoebe's

vision. I say we give him the benefit of the doubt. For now, anyway."

She folded her arms and gave each of her sisters her sternest look. "Okay. So do we have a truce here?"

Phoebe pursed her lips. Prue rolled her eyes.

"Truce," Prue said after a moment.

"Truce," Phoebe echoed.

"Okay, good." Piper stood up and brushed crumbs from her lap. "Come on, Phoebe. Let's go be tourists. This is supposed to be a vacation, remember?"

Prue strode briskly down the steps of the hotel. She glanced at the list of bookshops in her hand. First stop, Milton Barnett, Inc., on a street called . . . she frowned at her own handwriting. "Heol y Dwr"? Could that possibly be right?

She stopped on the sidewalk and pulled out her map. Checking it, she found Heol y Dwr right there, a few blocks away. "I'll never understand Welsh," she muttered to herself, setting off at a brisk walk. "How can they have a word without any vowels in it?"

Her route took her past Mrs. Jeffries's produce stand. As she drew near, Prue caught sight of a couple picking over the strawberries. The woman was striking, with long, curling auburn hair and pale, creamy skin. She wore a calf-length dress of some silky pale green fabric and

a muted plum-colored chiffon scarf around her neck. Another scarf, this one the same shade as her dress, bound her hair back from her face.

And the man . . . Prue felt a start of surprise as she recognized him. It was Niall.

As she watched, the woman leaned in to Niall and said something in his ear. At the same time, she put her hand on his arm. It was a casual move, but there was something possessive, something intimate about it.

Those two are more than just friends, Prue thought. Her eyes narrowed. And that jerk is making a move on Phoebe! I knew I was right about him!

Should I confront him? she wondered. Or should I just play it cool? But before she could make up her mind what to do, Niall and the woman walked away.

Prue stepped up to the table. "Good morning," she said to Mrs. Jeffries.

"Oh, good morning, dear," Mrs. Jeffries said. But her smile was distracted. There was an anxious look in her brown eyes.

"How are the strawberries today?" Prue asked.

Mrs. Jeffries seemed to rouse herself with an effort. "As good as ever. Try one," she said, and held a carton of plump berries out to Prue. But her hand shook so badly that the berries spilled all over the tabletop. "There, look what I've gone and done!"

Mrs. Jeffries set down the carton and began picking up strawberries, shaking her head. "Are you all right?" Prue asked, concerned.

The old lady glanced up at Prue. "To tell you true, no, I am not," she said. "It's silly, but I'm that rattled."

Prue frowned. "Rattled? Why?"

"It was that girl. The one who was just here. Maybe you saw her," Mrs. Jeffries said. "Very pretty, she was. But there was just something—I don't know how to describe it. And she did ask so many questions."

"Questions about what?"

"Oh, where I live, when my husband passed away, did I have any children or grandchildren. Did I go to the local church. Simple enough questions. There was just something in her eyes that made me feel . . . cold." Mrs. Jeffries sighed. "I expect I'm being a silly old biddy. She was only trying to be friendly." She gave a sudden, convulsive shiver. "They do say there always have been witches in these parts, ever since the days of the Druids. I always laughed at the tall tales, but that girl made me wonder if maybe they could be true."

"I don't think you're being silly at all," Prue said. Alarm bells were ringing in her mind. Witches . . . Druids . . . "I think you should definitely trust your instincts about people." She hesitated. "What about the man who was with this woman? What was he like?"

Mrs. Jeffries shrugged. "I hardly noticed him. He seemed a nice enough young man."

"Hmmm. Well, take care of yourself. And if you see them coming again, duck," Prue advised.

Mrs. Jeffries laughed. "You make me feel better, dearie. You really do."

Prue bought a peach and continued on her way. It's all very well to tell Mrs. Jeffries to trust her instincts, she mused. But Phoebe's instincts and mine seem to be totally at war. I think she's wrong, but I don't know how to convince her.

And it could be a matter of life and death.

When Phoebe came back from dinner that night, Prue and Piper were both waiting up for her. She groaned when she saw them. "What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?"

Prue suppressed a twinge of irritation. She reminded herself how much she disliked being interrogated about her own love life. "We just wanted to hear how the evening went."

"You mean you want to know what story he told me about the mysterious Other Woman," Phoebe said.

Over tea in a cozy little shop, Prue had told Phoebe and Piper what she'd seen at the fruit stand that morning. Phoebe had reluctantly agreed to ask Niall who the other woman was.

Now she sauntered across the room, peeling off her silk cardigan as she walked. "As a matter of fact, I did ask him."

"And?" Piper prompted.

"And everything is fine. The woman's name is Diana Jones, and she's a colleague of his. He's staying at her flat while he's in town. That's all. There's nothing going on between them." Phoebe sank down into a chair. A dreamy smile played across her lips.

You believed that? Prue wanted to demand. But she held her tongue. Antagonizing Phoebe wouldn't help anything.

"Um, Phoebe," Piper said, "I don't want to seem overly suspicious or anything, but . . . "

"I know what you're thinking," Phoebe said. "You're thinking I'm an idiot for falling for that line. But get this—Niall actually took me over to Diana's flat for coffee. I met her! He held my hand in front of her!" Her smile faded a bit. "Granted, she was kind of, well, aloof. But she was perfectly civil. She even said Niall had told her all about me. So unless there's something really kinky going on, I think he was telling me the truth." Her eyes shone. "Please stop worrying, Prue. I know you're trying to look out for me, and I love you for it, but I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself." She hugged herself. "Mmmm—he just makes me feel so alive!"

Prue couldn't bring herself to argue about

Niall anymore. What good would it do? And anyway, Phoebe looked so radiant. Prue didn't have the heart to bring her down.

For once, she thought, I just hope I'm wrong.

Piper glanced at her watch one more time. Should she wake Phoebe up?

For some reason, Piper had woken at seven that morning, feeling totally refreshed. She'd had breakfast with Prue. Then Prue went off to a morning meeting, and Piper had gone back to their room. While she waited for Phoebe to wake up, she read her book about Victorian wildflowers.

But now it was ten o'clock, and she was starting to get restless. Hey, maybe I'll go out to look for flowers for my love posy, she decided. I'll let Phoebe sleep.

Piper pulled out a local map and studied it for a moment. If she went out along the river path, she should come to some open land less than a mile out of town. That sounded good. She scribbled a note to Phoebe, then tossed the map and the flower book into her leather minibackpack, along with a bottle of water from the minibar. Then she set out.

It took her only half an hour to leave the town completely behind. She gazed at the green, rolling fields. The sky was a soft blue, dotted with puffy white clouds. Crickets thrummed gently around her. Otherwise, there

was no sound; she could have been the only person for miles. Piper inhaled deeply, loving the scent of sun-warmed grass.

She consulted her wildflower book. "Let's see . . . bloodwort," she muttered. " 'Red'—well, duh, with a name like bloodwort—'with several small, many-petaled blossoms on a long stalk.' And then there's Daffyd's mallow. That's blue." She frowned at the watercolor illustration. The flower looked a bit like a blue dandelion.

She peered around. It didn't take her more than a minute to find a whole clump of the mallow. And there were plenty of the little yellow-and-white daisies that the book called "star's fire." Piper picked a handful of blossoms and stuck them in the outer pocket of her backpack. That was easy, she thought.

But she wasn't having much luck with the bloodwort. In fact, there didn't seem to be any red flowers in the whole field, as far as she could see.

Ahead and to her right was a grove of tall, stately oak trees. Piper strolled slowly toward it, glancing from side to side. Aha! Bloodwort! She stooped to gather some of the tiny red blossoms.

Then her head snapped up, as she heard the drone of voices coming from somewhere in the trees ahead of her. Many voices, both male and female, and speaking in unison. Chanting.

In spite of the bright sunshine, a chill crawled down Piper's arms. She crept cautiously forward, sticking to the deep shadows under the trees. The voices grew louder.

She peeked out from behind the thick trunk of an old oak. Her eyes widened.

In front of her was a large clearing. Two huge gray pillars of stone stood on end in the middle of the clearing. Piper had seen pictures of Stonehenge, and even though these stones had no crosspiece on top, she knew at once that they were the same kind of structure. It was also obvious that they'd been placed there ages ago. Their surfaces were deeply pitted and covered with gray-green lichen.

A ring of men and woman in white robes surrounded the stones. Their hands were clasped. They were chanting softly in a language Piper had never heard before. A faint greenish glow hovered around the stones. As the chant rose and fell, the glow seemed to pulse in time with it.

But Piper's eyes were locked on the figures in the middle of the ring, between the stones. A man and a woman, they stood embracing each other. Their eyes were closed. The green glow played over their still forms.

The woman was slim. She had long, auburn hair, pulled back with a fluttering scarf of pale green chiffon.

And the man . . .

Piper stared in sick dismay at his long, black hair. At his lithe, muscular torso, which happened to be bare. He was turned so that she saw his profile; saw his thin, hawkish nose and firm chin. He was instantly recognizable.

Niall.

CHAPTER 4

Without thinking, Piper took a step forward. For Phoebe's sake, she had to be sure—even though she already knew that the man in the clearing was Niall.

Crack! A dry twig snapped under her foot. In the stillness, the sound was like a gunshot.

The chant broke off. The green glow flickered and vanished. A white-robed man with a beard turned sharply toward the spot where Piper stood. "Who's there?" he demanded. He took a step forward.

Piper didn't hesitate. Whoever these people were, they had at least some command over magic. What's more, she definitely didn't want Niall to know she had seen him. Time to use her own power.

She made a quick, flicking gesture with her right hand. In the blink of an eye, the group in the clearing froze. The bearded man stood with his foot raised, in the middle of a step. The woman next to him was caught midsneeze. A dragonfly hung motionless in the air above the nearer standing stone.

Piper turned and hurried back through the trees. They should stay frozen like that for a good four or five minutes, she calculated—long enough for her to be well out of their sight, and on her way back to town. She needed to talk to her sisters immediately.

It looks as if Prue was right about Niall, she thought. Which means we've got a big problem on our hands.

Phoebe turned off the hot water and drew back the shower curtain. She stepped out of the old-fashioned claw-foot tub and squished down into a soaked bath mat. Whoops. Once again, she'd made a huge puddle on the bathroom floor. No matter how she fiddled with the shower curtain, she couldn't seem to adjust it so that that water stayed inside the tub.

"The British really don't get this shower thing," she grumbled aloud as she wrapped a towel around her hair. Pulling on one of the hotel's fluffy white terry robes, she padded into the bedroom. She stopped in surprise at the

sight of Prue, who was lounging on the sofa, leafing through a guidebook.

"Hey!" Prue greeted her. "Slept in this morning, huh?"

"Still jet-lagged, I guess." Phoebe pulled the towel off her hair and began to comb it out. "What are you doing here? I thought you had to work all day."

"Me, too. But the dealer I was supposed to meet with today had to go to London, and he's not coming back until the end of the week."

"That's annoying," Phoebe commented. She eyed Prue a little warily. I really hope she's not going to try to talk to me about Niall today, she thought. Because I am *so* not in the mood to argue.

But Prue just grinned. "It should be annoying," she corrected. "But actually, I'm glad to have an excuse to play hooky. I was hoping we could all go see some sights together. I was reading about this ruined abbey about twenty miles south of here. It's supposed to be incredibly beautiful. I thought maybe we could buy ourselves a picnic lunch, rent a car, and check it out."

"That sounds fantastic!" Phoebe felt a surge of relief. No fighting today. "As long as you drive. This whole driving-on-the-other-side-of-the-road thing really throws me. I keep looking the wrong way whenever I cross a street. I nearly got run over at least three times yesterday."

"I think I can handle it," Prue assured her. She stood up, and Phoebe noticed that she was wearing cutoff denim shorts and a tank top instead of her business attire. "Hurry up and get dressed. We'll go out and buy lunch while we're waiting for Piper to come back."

Prue continued talking as Phoebe went into the next room and began to dress. "I know this great fruit stand—the place where I got those amazing strawberries night before last. The lady promised she'd have cherries today. And then I thought we could stop at that bakery on Castle Street to get some of those little turnover things filled with cheese and spinach."

"And a bottle of white wine, of course," Phoebe put in as she pulled her shirt over her head. "Can't have a picnic without white wine." She stepped into a pair of jeans, smiling to herself. The day was shaping up to be pretty nice.

It would be just perfect if I could invite Niall along, she thought. Then she shook her head. No, better not push it. Prue was obviously trying to patch things up; Phoebe felt she should meet her halfway. Anyway, she'd see Niall later that afternoon. They had made plans to go for a walk by the river.

At the memory of their last stroll, Phoebe felt a faint tingle run over her skin.

She pulled her still-wet hair back in two braids. Then she strapped on a pair of sandals

and grabbed her sunglasses off the bureau. "Ready!" she announced.

She and Prue headed up the block to Prue's fruit stand. But as they neared the corner, Prue frowned. "That's weird. Mrs. Jeffries's table isn't there."

"Maybe she's playing hooky today, too," Phoebe suggested.

Prue shook her head. "It doesn't seem like her. She said she was here every day, rain or shine."

As they stood there, the door to a house across the street opened and a thin, elderly man in a cardigan stepped out. When he caught sight of the girls he crossed the street to them.

"Looking for Blodwen Jeffries, are you?" he asked. "Eh, that's queer, then. Blodwen is here every day in the summer. But I have not seen her today. I wonder where she is." Shaking his head, he set off down the sidewalk, heading toward the center of town.

Prue's frown deepened. "I wonder if she's sick or something," she said. She bit her lip. "Phoebe, would you mind if we took a little detour? Her cottage is right down the street. I just want to stop by to make sure she's okay."

Phoebe's face must have reflected the surprise she felt, because Prue quickly added, "I know, I'm probably overreacting. It's just that she lives alone. If she had a fall or something, she might not be able to get to a phone. But

really, I'm sure everything's fine. I'm sure she just had other things to do today."

"Whatever you say." Phoebe gave her older sister a sideways smile. Prue might seem a little hard-edged sometimes, but really, she was as soft and tender as a marshmallow.

The two girls hurried down the block until they reached a little whitewashed Tudor-style cottage surrounded by a wall of mellow red bricks. A white wooden gate opened into a shady garden fragrant with the scent of ripe peaches and cherries.

Prue led the way up a flagstone walk to the wooden front door. There was no bell, so she knocked briskly.

Creeeaaakkk! The door swung open.

Whoa, Phoebe thought. That's a little unusual. She glanced at Prue, whose expression was troubled.

"Mrs. Jeffries?" Prue called. She took a step inside. "Are you here?"

No answer. Prue took another step inside.

Phoebe was right behind her. She peered around the shadowy interior of the cottage, letting her eyes adjust after the bright sunshine outside.

She could hear tinny big-band music coming from somewhere inside. The air was close and musty, with a faint odor of cooking cabbage.

The back of Phoebe's neck prickled. She wasn't sure why, but something felt wrong here.

"Come on." Prue led the way slowly through the living room, which was furnished with two shabby but carefully mended armchairs and a small sofa, all covered in the same worn flowered chintz. The mantelpiece over the fireplace was crowded with porcelain figurines. Even in the dimness, Phoebe could see that they'd all been dusted not long ago.

The tinny music grew louder as they approached a swinging wooden door. Prue pushed it open, and Phoebe found herself staring into an old-fashioned kitchen. Like the living room, it was worn and shabby, but spotlessly clean.

The cooking smell was much stronger in here, and it was immediately obvious why. A plate of half-eaten beef and cabbage sat on the wooden kitchen table. One of the two straight-backed chairs was pushed back from the table, as if someone had just stood up. On the counter, a small fifties-era transistor radio blared out swing music.

Prue crossed to the table and looked down at the half-eaten meal. "It looks as if it's been sitting here for at least a few hours," she said, making a face.

Phoebe came up next to her. "Judging from the way she keeps this house, it doesn't seem likely that she'd just leave it there and go to bed. Not unless she was feeling sick or something."

"I think I'd better go up and check the bedrooms," Prue murmured. "She could be unconscious up there."

Phoebe nodded. She put her hand on the back of the crooked chair, intending to push it into place.

Instead, her fingers clamped around the top rung of the chair back as a vision struck her.

An old woman with short, curly white hair. Seated in this very chair, at this very table. Plate in front of her, fork in her hand. She was gazing up at another woman who stood over her. Her eyes were wide with dread.

Phoebe shuddered as the vision suddenly vanished. She opened her eyes. Prue was staring at her with a look of alarm.

"What?" Prue asked immediately. "What did you see?"

Phoebe drew in a deep breath. Her visions always left her feeling shaky and a little sick. "Mrs. Jeffries, I think. Does she have curly white hair?"

At Prue's nod, Phoebe continued, "She was sitting here, eating her dinner. There was another woman here with her. Someone she was obviously terrified of."

"And that's it? That's all you saw?" Prue asked urgently.

"Not exactly. I mean, that's where the vision ended, but there is one other thing," Phoebe admitted. She swallowed hard. "Prue, I recog-

nized her. The other woman, I mean. It was Niall's friend Diana."

"What?" Prue sucked in a long breath. "Phoebe, are you sure?"

Phoebe nodded miserably. "With that long red hair, she's pretty hard to miss."

"She was talking to Mrs. Jeffries just yesterday. That's where I saw her. Mrs. Jeffries was pretty freaked out by her," Prue added. She gave a grim smile. "She said the way Diana looked at her made her believe in witches."

Phoebe crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself. "Okay. So we're pretty sure Mrs. Jeffries didn't just take off for a spur-of-the-moment trip. Whatever happened to her, Diana had something to do with it," she said. "But it doesn't necessarily follow that Niall is involved. Does it?" She gazed pleadingly at Prue. "I mean, maybe he has nothing to do with any of this. That's possible, isn't it?"

Somewhat to her surprise, Prue's voice was gentle as she replied, "It's possible, Phoebe. And for your sake, I hope it's the truth. But right now we need to concentrate on finding out what happened to Mrs. Jeffries. Come on, let's make sure she's not in the house."

They quickly searched the upstairs. There were two small bedrooms up there, hardly more than attic rooms. Both were neat and empty.

While Phoebe checked the closets on the ground floor, Prue had a quick look around the

basement. She came up the steep stairs shaking her head. "No trace of her," she said.

Phoebe bit her lip. "Do you think we should go to the police? Maybe file a missing persons report?"

Prue shook her head again. "I think you have to be missing for forty-eight hours or something before they can do anything. Besides, I get the feeling that there's magic involved here. The police can't help with that." Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Come on," she said after a moment. "Let's go find Piper. We need to talk."

By the time Piper reached the Trelawney Hotel, she was flushed and sweaty. She glanced at her watch. She'd covered a mile in less than fifteen minutes. Not bad, for someone who gave up jogging years ago, she thought.

She raced through the lobby and dashed into the elevator just as the doors were closing. Please, let Phoebe be in the room, she begged silently. Then she winced as she thought of the bad news she was bringing. Ugh. This wasn't going to be a fun conversation.

She fished out her room key and flung open the door. Then she stopped short. Both Phoebe *and* Prue were sitting on the daybed. They glanced up as she walked in, and she noted that both their expressions were strained.

Well, if they're fighting about Niall again, I know just how to end it, Piper thought.

"Finally! You're back!" Prue said, getting to her feet. "Piper, we have a problem. We—"

"You bet we have a problem," Piper broke in. "Listen to me, both of you. You aren't going to believe what I just saw."

Swiftly, she described the circle of chanting men and women, and the green light around the standing stones. "There was a woman there with long, curly red hair, tied back with a green scarf," she said.

"Diana," Phoebe muttered. Briefly, Piper noted that she didn't seem surprised.

"I guess so," she agreed. "Whatever spell those people were casting, she was one of the people they were doing it to, if you know what I mean." She paused and took a deep breath. "But, Phoebe, here's the hard part. There was a man there, too. He was the other person being put under their spell. He and Diana were embracing." She sat down next to Phoebe and put a hand on her arm. "Phoebe, it was Niall."

Phoebe's face drained of all color. She bent over as if she'd just been punched in the stomach.

Piper felt an ache in her own throat as she stared at Phoebe's bent head. "I'm sorry, Phebes," she said softly. "I really am."

"I know." Phoebe's voice was muffled. "It's not your fault. It's just that . . . I was sure he was one of the good guys. And I—I liked him so much."

"Well." Prue cleared her throat. "I'd say that clinches it."

"Clinches what?" Piper stared at her older sister. "You mean there's more?"

Prue smiled grimly. "Oh, there's more. I have a feeling we stumbled into something pretty major here." She got to her feet. "Phoebe, will you fill Piper in? I've got to make some phone calls."

"You're *working?*" Piper sputtered. "At a time like this?"

"It's not exactly work," Prue said. "I'm going to call Darryl Morris." She checked her watch. "It's just about . . . three A.M. back in San Francisco. Oh, well. Guess Darryl's having an early start today."

"Huh?" Piper wasn't following. "Darryl Morris as in . . . friend on the San Francisco homicide squad? What are you calling him for?"

"We need some help from someone official," Prue explained. "Someone who can check up on things like credit histories and criminal records." There was a determined glint in her eyes. "I think it's time we found out everything there is to know about Niall Oldman."

CHAPTER 5

Thanks a million, Darryl. And I really am sorry I woke you up," Prue said into the phone. She listened for a moment. "Okay, okay, I owe you one. Yes, something big. I'll bring you back a present from England, okay? No, I promise it won't be a beer mug with the queen's face on it. Right. Okay, thanks again. Talk to you soon."

She hung up and turned to her sisters, who were gazing at her expectantly. "Darryl's on the case. He's going to call a friend at New Scotland Yard and another friend in Interpol," she reported. "He'll call us back as soon as he has any news. Phoebe, did you find that picture of Niall?"

"It's right here." Phoebe held up an eight-by-ten photo in a cardboard frame that read "A

Souvenir from Bombay Cottage." A woman at the restaurant had taken it the night of her first date with Niall. In the photo, Phoebe was smiling, but Niall's eyes were wide with alarm. One hand was raised as if he were trying to shield his face.

"He looks like a man with something to hide," Piper commented. She glanced at Phoebe. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Phoebe gazed at the picture, trying to ignore the pang that went through her. "I'm getting used to it."

"Come on." Prue took the photo and tucked it into her bag. "The hotel will have a fax machine. We'll fax this to Darryl from downstairs."

"Then what?" Phoebe wanted to know.

"I had an idea," Piper spoke up. "I thought maybe we could walk over to Diana's place and sort of case the joint. Maybe we could pretend we wanted to rent an apartment and ask the landlord about her or something."

"That's a great plan," Prue said. "Let's go."

The girls headed over to the Oxford Road. Phoebe pointed out a four-story brick Victorian set back from the street. "That's the place."

"Okay," Prue said. "Let's do it."

She marched briskly up the front steps and pressed the button marked Caretaker. Phoebe's nerves were jumping as they stood there, waiting. What if Diana came home while they were

still here? Worse yet, what if Niall came home? She didn't think she could face him. Not right now.

Then the door swung open and a short, heavyset man in a ratty old beige cardigan stood facing them. He had a red face topped by thinning black hair, a few strands of which were carefully combed across his head and plastered down. He peered suspiciously at the sisters.

"Yes?" he said gruffly. "Can I help you ladies?"

"Hi," Prue said, giving him a big smile. "We're Americans who are in town for a while, and we're looking for an apartment to rent." She giggled. "Whoops—I mean a flat."

Wow, Phoebe thought, impressed. She does a good imitation of an airhead. Already the caretaker was looking less suspicious.

"An acquaintance of ours lives in the building," Piper added. "Diana Jones. She said she thought you might have something available."

The caretaker's heavy black brows drew together. "Did she, now?" he said. "I'm sorry, but—"

"She said it was a wonderful building," Phoebe jumped in. She was starting to get into the swing of things. "She said the caretaker keeps it very well cared for." She gave him a flirty look. "You're the caretaker, right?"

The man's ample belly swelled a little more. "I am indeed. Why don't you young ladies step

inside for a moment? I was just making myself a cuppa. Let me turn the kettle off."

As soon as his back was turned the sisters gave each other triumphant looks.

"We don't have no vacancies at the moment," the caretaker said over his shoulder. Phoebe noticed that his accent was different from the Welsh burr she'd been hearing around Hay. He sounded more like a Londoner, with long, drawling vowels and dropped H's. "But I can put you girls down on me list if you like. You never know, something might open up."

"That would be great," Prue said. "We don't know Diana very well, but . . ." She trailed off, smiling.

The caretaker led them into a small, dark apartment cluttered with broken kitchen chairs and other cast-off furniture. A small television in the corner showed a billiards game in progress.

"I don't know Miss Jones too well, either," the caretaker said as the girls followed him into a messy kitchen. "Keeps to herself, she does."

"I met her in a shop that sells books about magic," Phoebe said, taking a wild stab.

"Don't tell me a nice young lady like you is into that nonsense, too," the caretaker said, giving her a disapproving look.

"Me? Oh, no," Phoebe said quickly. "I was just browsing." She tried to sound casual. "Is Diana really into magic, then?"

The caretaker picked up an electric kettle and poured hot water into a mug that looked as if it hadn't been washed in a week. Phoebe had a moment of panic. What if he offered them some tea?

Thankfully, he didn't. "Like I said, I don't know her very well," he said, stirring the tea with an equally encrusted spoon. "But I've been inside her flat a few times, fixing things and whatnot. It's full of candles, and what do you call 'em, pentagrams, and bunches of holly and all that. One time I went to move a bit of holly as was tied over one of her kitchen cabinets. I needed to get at the plumbing inside, see? Well, she nearly took me head off, screaming about how I wasn't ever to touch anything without her permission and if I needed something moved, I was to ask her to do it." He shook his head in disgust. "It's all that Druid rot. Earth magic, what have you. Long white robes and midnight ceremonies. There's lots of people in these parts as believes in it. Me own wife was from here. She used to yammer on about it all the time." He cast his eyes up to the ceiling. "Not anymore, thank the Lord."

"I'm sorry," Piper said politely. "Did she pass away recently?"

"Pass away? Her?" The caretaker let out a bark of laughter. "Not bloody likely. She ran off with our bank manager. Left me to look after this mausoleum by meself."

"Oh." Piper gave Phoebe and Prue a helpless look. Phoebe struggled to suppress a giggle. This was too much!

Prue's next words brought her back down to reality with a thud, though.

"What about Diana's boyfriend?" Prue asked the caretaker.

The caretaker scowled. "You mean that shifty-looking fellow? The one with the long hair and the silly clothes?"

Phoebe's heart contracted inside her. That was Niall.

"That's him," Prue said. "Is he into magic, too?"

The caretaker scratched his belly reflectively. "Couldn't say. Never saw him before two weeks ago. He just showed up out of the blue."

Phoebe's heart lifted a little. Was there a chance that Niall's story was true? That he really was staying with Diana on business?

"But I reckon they go back a long ways, those two," the caretaker added. He gave a sour chuckle. "All they ever do is fight."

"Fight?" Piper leaned forward. "About what?"

"Who knows? I hear 'em yelling every bloody night. 'I'm not going to be your tame stallion!' says he, and she comes back with, 'You got no choice and you know it.' Maybe she wants a baby and he doesn't. Ain't that always the way?"

Phoebe's eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. None of this made any sense. What did any of it have to do with her, or with the weird Druid ceremony Piper saw? Looking at her sisters, she could see that they were confused, too.

"Well," Piper said. She stood up. "We've taken up too much of your time already. You're obviously a busy man."

"That I am, that I am," the caretaker agreed with a sigh, even though Phoebe could see no sign that he'd been doing anything but watching TV all morning.

He heaved himself to his feet. "About that apartment, then. Shall I put your names on me list? If you'll give me the number where you're staying, I could ring you if something comes up."

"We'll—uh, we'll call you," Prue said quickly, backing out the door. The three girls made their escape, blinking as they came out into the bright summer sunshine.

Prue looked at Piper and Phoebe. "So what do we know now?"

"Not a whole lot more than we did twenty minutes ago," Phoebe said gloomily. "Okay, so we know Diana is into this Druid stuff. And that she and Niall fight a lot."

"I know one other thing," Piper volunteered. She put a hand on her stomach. "I am starved! Anybody have any objection to talking about this over lunch?"

No one spoke up. Piper sighed. "I can see it's going to be another cheerful meal. Come on, let's go back to the hotel."

Piper sat in the small rose garden behind the Trelawney Hotel, enjoying the feel of the sun on her face. I guess a sedentary afternoon isn't so bad after all, she thought.

She'd tried to persuade her sisters to drive down to the ruined abbey that afternoon, but with no luck. Prue and Phoebe were haunting their suite—Prue was waiting by the phone in case Darryl called, and Phoebe was moping over Niall.

Poor Phoebe. Suddenly, Piper's problems with Leo didn't seem so terrible. She looked down at the pile of wilted wildflowers in her lap. She'd retrieved them from her backpack, intending to start on her love-charm posy this afternoon.

I wish this posy thing really did work, she thought. Maybe I could make a charm to help Phoebe get over Niall.

Oh, well. At least the attraction hadn't gone too far. With time, Phoebe would get over it. Sighing, Piper flipped open *Wild Flowers of the Wye Valley* and turned to the section on charms.

Hmmm. As she began to work, she realized it was trickier than it had seemed at first. This posy was actually supposed to be braided together into a heart shape. Piper teased at the

delicate flower stalks, biting her lip as she concentrated.

A shadow suddenly fell across the open page of her book. Piper glanced up to see a stocky, bald man in a tweed jacket standing next to her. He looked vaguely familiar. He was peering around the garden as if searching for someone. But apart from Piper, there was no one there.

As Piper stared at him, he pulled a watch on a silver chain out of his vest pocket and consulted it. What he saw seemed to displease him. "Hoom, hahm," he sniffed.

The throat-clearing noise made Piper remember where she'd met him before. Right. Sir Andrew, from the bookshop.

"Oh, hello," she said, smiling at him. When he glanced down at her, she held up her book so that he could see the cover. "Remember me? Wildflower girl?"

"Er . . ." Sir Andrew looked vaguely alarmed. "Quite, quite. Charming to see you again. Now, if you'll just excuse me . . . meeting a fellow, don't you know . . ." He gazed around the empty garden as if willing his absent companion to appear from thin air. Then he turned and hurried back inside.

Grinning, Piper went back to her posy. She couldn't remember the last time she had actually frightened a grown man away. Aside from the occasional warlock, that is.

A few moments later she held up her work

and examined it critically. The heart was a bit lopsided, but definitely recognizable. Not bad for a first try, Piper decided. I bet if I dry this, it'll be really pretty. If nothing else, it'll be a nice memento of this trip.

She glanced back at the book. "Whoops! Almost forgot to say the charm," she murmured. Holding the posy over her heart, as the book directed, she chanted:

"For constancy, this mallow blue
Shall never give me cause to rue.
Bloodred wort makes passion blaze;
Add fire of stars for length of days.
Behold the spell I weave for you!
Lover, to me alone be true."

She finished, then closed the book a little self-consciously. Had anyone overheard her? She glanced around the empty garden.

Make that the not-quite-empty garden. Sir Andrew had come back out, presumably to take another look for his friend. Piper hadn't heard his footsteps on the soft turf.

But he seemed to have heard her chant. He was staring at her with a peculiar expression on his blunt-featured face. He shook his head as if an insect was buzzing around him. "Excuse me, could you repeat that?" he asked slowly, as if they'd been in the middle of a conversation.

Piper blushed. "Oh—uh, it was nothing,

really," she said quickly. "Just a silly rhyme I found in this book. I was reading it aloud, that's all."

She stood up to go inside.

"Wait!" Sir Andrew cried suddenly. "Don't go!"

Piper stared at him, astonished.

"Er, that is . . . I mean to say, well, what's the hurry?" Sir Andrew babbled. His heavy cheeks began to turn red. "Lovely weather we're having, isn't it? I always say June is the finest time of year. Don't you think so?"

"Uh, sure," Piper agreed, keeping her eyes on him. What was going on? Why was he so friendly all of a sudden?

"Have you seen the tea roses?" Sir Andrew went on. "The Trelawney has a creditable garden, quite creditable indeed. May I show you these over here?" Without waiting for a reply, he herded Piper toward a bed of small, fragrant, peach-colored roses. Stooping, he plucked one of the blossoms and handed it to Piper with clumsy gallantry. "If I may say so, its beauty pales next to yours, my dear," he said, then turned even redder. "Hoom, hahm!"

Oh, no! Piper's mouth practically fell open. She was starting to feel the prickings of a horrible suspicion. . . .

Could it be that the love posy had actually worked?

Worked on Sir Andrew?

"Yes, well, it's been great, but I really have to run," she began, edging toward the French doors that led back into the hotel lobby. "I've got all kinds of things to do."

"Wait!" Sir Andrew hurried after her. "Er . . . perhaps you'd care to come out and have a look at my roses, Miss . . . I beg your pardon—I don't believe I caught your name."

"Piper," she answered automatically. "Piper Halliwell." She strode toward the elevator and pushed the button urgently.

"What an extraordinarily lovely name," Sir Andrew declared. "I don't think I've ever heard a name so lovely. Miss Halliwell—Piper—you're utterly enchanting. Do have dinner with me tonight. Please!"

Oh, no. It's true, Piper thought. She put a hand to her forehead, mortified. The stupid charm actually worked. I put a love spell on Sir Andrew!

Where on earth is the elevator?

"I know a charming little spot by the river," Sir Andrew was saying. He took one of her hands and pressed it between both of his. His palms were hot and moist. "Do say you'll come." He took a step closer, so that he was practically crushing her against the closed elevator doors. "Do!"

"Uh, well, I already have plans," Piper said. She glanced around her with rising desperation. How was she going to get out of this?

Fortunately, at that moment, the elevator arrived. With a soft chime, the doors slid open.

Piper practically fell in, pushing past a stout elderly woman who was trying to get out. The woman gave her a dirty look, but Piper ignored it. She slapped her palm down on the button for her floor.

Sir Andrew was trying to follow her, but he was being thwarted by the stout woman, who inadvertently kept getting in his way. "If you please, madam!" he snapped.

"If *you* please, sir!" she shot back icily.

"Nice seeing you again, Sir Andrew," Piper called as the doors began to slide shut.

Sir Andrew stared at her, stricken. "But—but, Piper! Darling! I love you!" he blurted out. The last image Piper had was of him reaching imploringly out to her as the stout woman gave him a disapproving glare. Then the doors closed in his face.

Piper sagged against the wall and let out a long sigh.

What had she done?

"No, I don't think you really want to know any more than I've already told you. It's witch business. That's right, the *W* word. Well, sorry, but I told you you didn't want to know. Thanks again, Darryl."

Prue hung up the phone and sat back in her

chair, frowning. She was feeling more and more worried.

"So?" Piper asked. "What did he find out?"

Prue threw a quick glance at Phoebe. Phoebe caught the look.

"What?" she said with a groan. "Are you going to tell me Niall has a rap sheet as long as my arm?"

Prue shook her head. "Nothing like that. No, the weird thing is, Niall doesn't have any kind of records at all. No birth certificate, no address, no phone number, no credit history . . . nothing. I mean, he could be using a phony name, but you'd think he would do that only if he had some kind of criminal past that he was trying to cover up. But even with the photo, all Darryl's searches there came up negative, too. If Niall is a criminal, he's good enough that he's never been caught." She held out her hands. "But then why bother to use a phony name?"

Phoebe jumped up and began to pace back and forth on the sitting room carpet. "I'm sick of this," she burst out. "I'm sick of trying to guess who he really is and what he's really up to. I say we just confront him and make him tell us."

Piper pursed her lips. "Phoebe, that's pretty risky, especially since we know so little about him."

"How risky can it be?" Phoebe argued. "We're the Charmed Ones. Together, we've got the Power of Three. Even if Niall is a warlock or

a demon or whatever, I'll bet you we're stronger than he is."

"Yeah, but . . ." Piper glanced at her older sister. "Prue, help me out here."

Prue twiddled a strand of her dark hair thoughtfully. She knew Phoebe was mostly trying to get the painful part over with as fast as possible. But still . . .

"Actually, I agree with Phoebe," she said. "The Power of Three is a serious weapon. And we're not exactly getting anywhere using more conventional methods. I think we should try it her way."

"You're kidding!" Phoebe looked surprised and pleased. "I mean—you're not kidding. Let's give that jerk the *real* third degree." She winced slightly. "By which I mean, you two can give him the real third degree. I will be hiding in the bathroom because I'm too chicken to face him right now. But if you need me for the Power of Three," she added hurriedly, "I'm with you. One hundred percent."

Prue laughed. "Okay. Good to know we can count on you." She checked her watch. "You'd better get going into the bathroom. Niall's picking you up at six, right? Well, that's about two minutes of now."

"Yikes!" Phoebe grabbed a magazine and darted into the bathroom. "I'll be listening," she called as the door closed.

A moment later there was a soft knock at the

suite door. Prue and Piper looked at each other. "This is it," Prue said.

She straightened her shoulders. Then she crossed to the door and opened it on Niall's smiling face. Today he wore a billowing white cotton shirt, open at the neck, tucked into a pair of close-fitting black jeans. Everything looked brand-new.

He looks like the cover model for a romance novel, Prue thought, not a warlock.

She gave him a cool smile and stepped aside to let him in.

He nodded a hello to Piper, then glanced around. "Isn't Phoebe here, then?" he asked.

"She'll be along in a minute," Prue said. She closed the door, discreetly turned the key in the old-fashioned lock, then dropped the key into her pocket. Not that a locked door would hold Niall if he turned out to have magic powers, but somehow it made her feel better.

"Have a seat," she went on, waving Niall toward the one armchair in the room. "We want to talk to you."

Niall sat down. "What, more tough questions?" he said with a laugh, but Prue thought she detected a wary note in his voice.

"You could say that," Piper murmured.

Prue moved to stand in front of him. She crossed her arms. "Why don't you start by telling us who you really are?" she suggested in a quiet voice.

"And what exactly you and that group of Druids were doing out at the standing stones this morning," Piper added.

That definitely got a reaction. Prue saw an unmistakable flash of shock in Niall's eyes. "I—I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Don't give us that," Piper said. "I saw you."

"Who are you?" Prue pressed. "What have you done with Mrs. Jeffries? And what do you want with Phoebe?"

"Who is Mrs. Jeffries? And what's Phoebe got to do with anything?" Niall demanded. He was starting to sound belligerent.

"As if you didn't know," Piper said angrily. "Is this all part of some elaborate ploy to get the Power of Three? Because it isn't going to work."

"The power of what?" Niall stared from one sister to the other. "Look, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about, but I don't want to stay here for any more of it. Tell Phoebe I'll meet her downstairs." He stood up and started toward the door.

"Don't even think about it," Prue snapped. Without bothering to uncross her arms, she made a flicking gesture with one hand.

Niall flew backward, thudding into the armchair with such force that it skidded a few inches across the carpeted floor.

He gaped up at Prue, openmouthed.

"Are you—are you a witch?" he asked after a long pause.

Prue snorted. "If that's the game you want to play, fine," she said. "Yes, I'm a witch. So are both my sisters."

"We're the most powerful witches around," Piper added. "Believe me, you really don't want to get on our bad side. So I suggest you tell us what we want to know."

"You're . . . you're all witches?" Niall repeated. His voice was hushed, awed. Prue frowned, disconcerted. She could have sworn his surprise was genuine.

What he said next disconcerted her even more.

"Thank God!" he cried. "Please—I need your help!"

CHAPTER 6

Prue's eyes narrowed as she gazed at Niall. "Say again?" she said. "You need our help?"

"Yes! Yes!" Niall clutched both hands to his head as if he was afraid it would burst. "Thank all the gods I've found you. Now maybe I can find a way out of this nightmare!"

"What nightmare?" Piper demanded.

Niall dropped his hands onto the arms of the chair. He leaned back. "I suppose I'd better start at the beginning," he said. He glanced up at the sisters apologetically. "I hope you don't have any immediate plans. This could take a while."

Prue heard the soft snick of the bathroom door opening in the other room. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Phoebe glide forward

and take up a position by the bedroom door where she could hear better.

"I'm not who I seem to be," Niall began.

"No kidding," Piper muttered.

"I was brought here about two weeks ago by Diana and her group of Druids," Niall went on.

"Brought from where?" Prue asked.

"Not where," Niall corrected. "*When.*"

Prue caught her breath. "Are you saying you're not from our time?"

"Not even remotely," Niall agreed. He gave a short, unhappy laugh. "I cannot tell you what a shock this century has been to me. You see, I come from the year 584. That's according to your calendar. Ours was somewhat different."

From the doorway, Phoebe let out a sharp gasp. At the sound, Niall turned his head and spotted her. He looked suddenly drained.

"Ah, Phoebe, I'm sorry," he murmured. "Sorry I didn't tell you all the truth. But how could I know who you were?"

"Never mind that right now," Phoebe said. She came into the sitting room and leaned against the desk. "The year 584? That's right around the time King Arthur was supposed to have ruled. Are you saying. . . ?"

Niall nodded. "I am from his court, yes." He gave a sudden grin. "That's why I am so certain that he did not know how to ride a horse, you see. Horses made him sneeze."

"Hold on a minute," Prue said. She put her

hands on her hips. "Can you give us one good reason why we should believe this story of yours? Do you have any proof that you're actually from fourteen hundred years in the past?"

Niall reached inside his shirt and drew out a soft leather pouch that hung from a rawhide cord around his neck. He shook it over his palm. Two or three silver coins fell out. He handed them to Prue. "You know about antiques," he said. "You'll no doubt recognize these."

She studied the coins, cool and heavy in her palm. They were slightly irregular in shape. All were stamped with the same Roman-looking head crowned with some kind of wreath.

Her heart gave a sudden, hard thump as she realized what was different about them. She stared at them for a long minute, then raised her eyes to Niall. "You could have forged these," she pointed out.

"I could have, I suppose," he acknowledged. "But that would take a lot of work, don't you think? At any rate, I didn't. I just happened to have them with me when I was . . . taken."

"Wait," Piper broke in. "I don't get it. So he shows you a couple of old coins. Why couldn't he have bought them from an antique dealer or stolen them from a museum or something like that?"

"Actually, they're *not* old, Piper," Prue pointed out. "That's the point. Look at them—

how sharp the etching is, how detailed the relief. These coins haven't been lying around for fourteen hundred years. They're no more than twenty years old at the most."

Phoebe cleared her throat. Prue watched hope and suspicion chase each other across her face.

"It still isn't proof," Phoebe said. "You could have forged these coins, like Prue said. Or you could have gotten them by magic."

Niall smacked the arm of his chair in frustration. "All right, it's true. But here in this wonderful age where all is possible, how am I supposed to prove anything to you? I'm just a simple man from a simple time. I believe in magic and miracles. And I swear to you that I am telling you the truth." His voice was pleading. "That is the best I can do."

There was a long silence. Then Prue moved to the daybed and sat down.

"All right, let's assume for now that we believe you," she said. "Tell us the rest of the story."

Niall steepled his fingers under his chin. He drew in a deep breath.

"I am the son of the Druid Merlin and Nifein the Enchantress," he began. "You people seem to call her Nimue or Viviane, but I tell you her name was Nifein."

Phoebe was staring at him with her mouth open. "Merlin?" she repeated. "As in . . .

Merlin?" Her eyebrows drew together. "He didn't have a son. At least, not in any of the books I read."

"It was not widely known who my true parents were. My lord Arthur thought it better, for my safety," Niall explained. His gray-blue eyes darkened. "I never knew them. My lady mother sealed my father into a castle of air before I was born. After I was born she herself went away—no one knows where. But I believe they are together in their castle."

Prue noticed that he was speaking with a different cadence now. His voice was slower, deeper, the unfamiliar accent more marked.

"I was raised at Caer Annyl, on the coast, by a noble family close to my lord Arthur. I am his loyal man, the captain of one of his galleys," he went on. "Or I was—until a fortnight ago, when I was taking my ship across the mouth of the river Severn. I was standing in the bow, watching for the far shore, when it seemed that a great whirlpool opened beneath me and swallowed me up. And when I could see and hear again, I was . . . here." He spread his hands. "At the standing stones. The ones where you saw me this morning," he added, turning to Piper.

"Diana is the one who summoned me," he continued. "Diana is the high priestess of this little band of Druids." He snorted contemptuously. "Druids, they call themselves! Poor misguided creatures, most of them, who have read

a lot of nonsense about the ancient ways and who hunger for any escape from their narrow lives.

"But Diana is different. Diana has a little power of her own and a hunger for a great deal more. And she believes she has found a way to get it—through me."

Prue felt a prickle of unease. "What do you mean? Is she trying to steal your power?"

Niall shook his head. "I have no power of my own," he explained. "Although my parents were two of the greatest enchanters who ever lived, their power did not pass to me. Not directly, that is. But Diana says it is in my blood."

"Like a recessive gene," Piper murmured. "I guess it makes sense in a crazy kind of way."

"So if the power is in your blood, how does she plan to get it?" Prue asked. "A transfusion?"

"There is an ancient rite," Niall said. He flicked a glance at Phoebe, and Prue thought she saw a hint of embarrassment in his eyes. What's that about? she wondered.

"Arthur banned it," Niall went on. "Before that, it was practiced every midsummer's day. I've heard some of the Druids here call it Beltane, but it was never called that in my time."

"Beltane?" Phoebe repeated, frowning. "I remember reading something about that. Isn't it some kind of fertility ritual?"

"In a way. It celebrates the union of the Sun God and the Queen of Summer," Niall said. He was totally avoiding Phoebe's gaze now, Prue saw. And were his ears turning red?

Phoebe's gaze suddenly hardened. "Mmm-hmm," she said, folding her arms. "Celebrates how, exactly?"

"A man is chosen to represent the Sun God. A woman represents the Summer Queen. They are prepared with spells and chants for twelve days before. Then, on midsummer's day, they are anointed with the ritual oils, clad in the ritual robes, and brought to the standing stones," Niall explained. He paused.

"Go on," Phoebe prodded.

Niall cleared his throat. "The purpose of the rite is to make a child," he said. "To renew the year at the moment when it starts to wane. To continue the cycle of life. To—"

"Wait a second," Prue broke in. "Back up. Did you say 'make a child'?"

Niall hunched up his shoulders and nodded.

"Just to clarify," Piper said carefully. "Who exactly is representing the Sun God and the Summer Queen?"

"I'll give you two guesses," Phoebe muttered.

Prue stared at Niall in disbelief. "So you and Diana are going to re-create this ancient Druid ritual and . . . and make a baby?" she demanded. "What on earth for?"

"I told you. She wants power," Niall said. He looked up. "She believes that a child with my blood in its veins will be as powerful as Merlin, my father. Maybe even more so. And it will be hers. She will control it absolutely."

He turned to Phoebe. "Please, you have to believe me, I want none of this," he burst out. "I was brought here against my will. Diana keeps me here against my will. I have no love for her."

"Right." Phoebe drummed her fingers on the desk. "I suppose it never occurred to you to just say no? 'Thank you very much, Diana, but I have a headache'?" Her eyes glittered with anger. "Or would that be too unmanly?"

"Don't you think I would say no if I could?" Niall cried. "I can't. They hold all the power, don't you see? They brought me here, and they can send me back. But only if I do as they say. And if they don't send me back on the stroke of midnight on midsummer's day, I will die. Horribly. Those fourteen hundred years will catch up with me all at once. I'll crumble into dust in the space of a few minutes." He shuddered. "If I say no, I seal my fate. As long as they think I'll be their willing stud, though, they let me go about freely. And so I can search for my own way home."

There was a long silence. Phoebe picked fiercely at the cuticle of her thumb. Prue watched her, worried.

At last Phoebe lifted her head. "Why drag me

into all this?" she asked him. "If you really didn't know I was a witch, then why bother to get involved with me?"

"I couldn't help myself," Niall said simply. "When I saw you in that bookshop there was something in your eyes, right before you fainted. Something that reached right in and touched my soul. I never felt anything like it before. And I couldn't stay away."

He held her gaze steadily. Phoebe swallowed hard. Prue thought she saw the glitter of tears in her eyes.

"So what *were* you doing in that bookshop?" Prue asked slowly. She was remembering the tussle Phoebe had described, when Niall snatched the bit of parchment out of her hand. "What were you looking for?"

He tore his gaze away from Phoebe. "A way home," he replied. "It's said my father had the second sight. I don't know if that is true or not, but I do know that he left a message for me before I was even born. A letter. It said that if I was ever trapped in a land of strangers, he had written a spell that would bring me home again. All I had to do was find the spell."

"He couldn't just include the spell in the letter?" Piper murmured.

"I have never understood the tortured laws that govern prophecy," Niall replied. He shrugged. "Anyway, I have been searching high

and low for the spell. That was what I was doing in Caer Wydyr."

"But you didn't find it," Phoebe said softly. "That was why you were so upset."

He nodded. "My father would have written the spell on a piece of parchment. That bit you found was covered with what looked like runes from a distance. But it must have been some scribe's practice sheet. It was gibberish."

Piper had been standing by the window, listening. Now she moved forward.

"Excuse me, but there's something I just don't get," she said. "You say you're from the sixth century, that you've only been in our time for two weeks. But you look totally modern. Your clothes are modern. You speak like a modern person. You don't seem freaked out by all our modern inventions, like TV and cars and electric lights." She spread her hands. "How do you explain this?"

"Diana," Niall replied. "She crammed a lifetime's worth of learning into me in a week, with the help of some Druid magic." He gave a lopsided grin. "But believe me, there are still many things about your world that shock me. Not just the inventions—the automobiles, the airplanes, the computers. But also the way people behave toward one another. The absence of rank. And the women—such freedom!" He made a helpless gesture with his hand. "I find it

very confusing. I suppose I've just learned to hide it."

"I have one more question," Prue said. "What about Mrs. Jeffries? What happened to her?"

"Honestly, I don't know who you mean," Niall said.

"The old lady who sells strawberries," Prue told him. "I saw you and Diana talking to her yesterday. Diana frightened her. And today she's missing." Her voice hardened. "Do you know where she is?"

Niall's eyes clouded. "I don't know *where* she is, but I think I can guess why she vanished. I told you that Arthur banned the midsummer ritual. I did not say why." He took a deep breath. "It was banned because it calls for a sacrifice."

"A *human* sacrifice?" Piper asked, aghast.

"Yes. A wicker giant is built—a hollow figure. The sacrifice is imprisoned inside the giant. And then the whole thing is set alight. Diana told me today that they were building the giant. And yesterday I noticed that she took great care to find out whether your Mrs. Jeffries had any people who would miss her." Niall sighed. "If she is gone now, it is because Diana plans to use her in the ritual."

"Oh, God!" Prue paced back and forth on the carpet. This was serious. Dead serious, if Niall was telling the truth.

She stopped abruptly and faced Niall. "My sisters and I need to discuss this," she told him. "In private."

"Of course." He started to stand. "Shall I wait downstairs?"

"No need." I'd rather not have you out of my sight, if you want the truth, Prue thought. "Piper, would you mind?"

"Not at all." Piper aimed a finger at Niall and curled it slightly.

He froze in place, half-crouched in the act of standing. His eyebrows were raised, and he had a surprised expression on his face.

Phoebe gazed at him for a second, then turned away. "Ugh. Can we go somewhere else? He looks just a little too weird like that," she murmured.

The sisters went into the bedroom. "Okay, so what do we think?" Prue demanded.

Piper walked over to the window. She stood fiddling with the curtain pull. "I think I believe him," she said after a moment. "It's the craziest story I've ever heard, but . . ." She trailed off, shrugging. "I don't know. I just believe him. How could you make up something like that?"

Prue exhaled slowly. "Yeah. I tend to agree."

"Yes!" Phoebe let out a happy squeal. She flung herself backward on the bed, arms spread wide. "I am so glad you guys believe him! Because I believe him, too, but I thought it was just because I have a thing for him. You know?"

She rolled over onto her stomach. "So we're going to help him, right?"

"Slow down, Phebes," Prue cautioned. "There's still a lot we don't know."

"Like just how powerful this Diana is," Piper added.

"Pffft." Phoebe blew out her breath and waved a dismissive hand. "She's no match for any of us. I can tell."

"We also need to find out where they're keeping Mrs. Jeffries and how we can rescue her," Prue pointed out. "I don't want to do anything that's going to tip our hand until we're sure she's safe."

"Right. Of course," Phoebe agreed. "But we are going to help Niall, aren't we? Aren't we?"

Prue and Piper exchanged grins.

"Yes, Phoebe," Piper said. "We're going to help him."

"Good. Then let's get to work," Phoebe said. "Because in case none of you remembers what day it is, it's June twentieth. Which means midsummer's day is tomorrow."

Chapter 7

"What we need," Piper said, "is a tracking spell." She reached over with her fork, speared a bit of pickle off Prue's plate, and popped it into her mouth.

It was about eight o'clock. The Halliwell sisters and Niall were seated in a booth at the Black Dog, a pub near Hay Castle, over plates of shepherd's pie and tall mugs of cider.

Prue glanced around nervously as Piper spoke, but as her eye swept the long, low-ceilinged room, she realized she didn't have to worry. The only other people in the place were a row of grizzled regulars lined up at the oak bar, nursing pints of beer. No one was listening to Piper.

"A tracking spell? What for?" Niall asked.

"Well, for one thing, it'll help us locate Mrs. Jeffries," Prue explained.

Phoebe swallowed a mouthful of cider. "And your father's spell," she added.

"I don't understand," Niall said, frowning. "What do you need to find Merlin's runes for? Can't you just send me back yourselves?"

"Uh, not exactly," Piper said. "Although we've managed to send *ourselves* through time on a couple of occasions, the spell we use wouldn't work on anyone who doesn't have our powers."

"See, we're still learning our powers," Phoebe put in. "We don't invent spells the way Merlin did. Not yet. All our spells are written down in a big book that's in our attic back home in San Francisco."

"Got it." Niall smiled at Phoebe, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He really does seem smitten with her, Prue admitted to herself. "So how do we find this tracking spell, then?"

"There are several in *The Book of Shadows*," Piper said. She cast a glance at Prue.

"Right." Prue took a last bite of her shepherd's pie and laid down her fork. "Well, I guess I'd better get going."

"Going?" Niall repeated, sounding a little lost.

"To San Francisco," Phoebe told him kindly. "That's where the book is, remember?"

"But—but—" He stared from one sister to the

other. Prue almost laughed at the baffled expression on his face. "Isn't that thousands of miles away? Even in one of your great jet planes, surely it takes at least a day or two to get there? Midsummer's day is tomorrow! There isn't time!"

"Relax," Phoebe said with a laugh. She took his hand. "Prue is traveling the old-fashioned way. By magic. She has the power to astral project. You know, go out of her body. You'll never even know she's gone. In fact, technically she *won't* be gone. Except in spirit, that is." She stopped and studied Niall's face. "Whoops. Am I freaking you out?"

"Leaving now," Prue announced. She couldn't help adding, for Niall's benefit, "If the waitress comes by, will someone order me another cider?"

"Oh, God," he moaned.

"You got it," Piper assured Prue, giggling.

Prue closed her eyes and began to focus inward. Within seconds she felt the now-familiar sensation of weightlessness, of being pulled irresistibly up, up, up through a long, dark tunnel . . . And then she was floating down through bright sunshine, flinching the way she always did when a roof loomed up at her, then relaxing again as she passed right through its seeming solidity.

She touched down on the attic floor of Halliwell Manor, the sisters' big Victorian

house. She stood for a moment, letting the moment of disorientation she always felt after one of her journeys fade. Then she crossed to the carved wooden stand that held *The Book of Shadows*.

As she approached, a breeze seemed to riffle the pages of the huge book. Prue smiled, knowing they would magically fall open at whatever page she needed to see. That certainly made her task easier. When she was astral projecting, she was basically a ghost—without substance. She had an advantage because of her other power, the ability to move things with her mind. But using that power was kind of like wielding a sledgehammer. It wasn't much good for a delicate task like turning pages.

She waited. In a second or two, the wind seemed to die and the pages of *The Book of Shadows* stopped flipping. Prue bent down and studied the spell on the page before her. Her lips moved slightly as she committed it to memory.

"Got it," she murmured aloud. Then she closed her eyes and began the journey back to her body.

Phoebe happened to be looking at Prue when she came back from her projection. She saw her oldest sister give a slight start, as if she had caught herself on the verge of nodding off. Prue's blue eyes fluttered open.

"Welcome back," Phoebe greeted her.

"How did it, er, how did it go?" Niall asked anxiously.

Prue took a gulp of cider. "I got what we need," she said. She waved the elderly waitress over and asked for the check. When it arrived, she placed some pound notes down on the scarred wooden table. "Come on, let's go back to the hotel. We're going to need privacy to cast the spell."

Back in their suite, Phoebe's eyes went wide as she spotted a gargantuan bouquet of roses in a crystal vase on the coffee table. A florist's card nestled among the deep red blossoms. "Whoa!" she exclaimed. "Who's the lucky girl?"

Beside her, Piper let out a gasp. She hurried forward and snatched the card. "Oh, no," she muttered as she read it.

"Piper?" Prue raised a quizzical brow at her. "What's up? Who are the flowers from? Leo?"

"Not exactly." Piper's cheeks were pink with embarrassment. "It's kind of a . . . a misunderstanding," she said. "I'll tell you about it later, okay? Right now, we need to get going on that tracking spell." She clapped her hands together. "Okay, what do we need?"

Phoebe gave Piper a curious look. But Piper was studiously focusing on Prue. Shrugging, Phoebe let it go.

"For finding the spell, we need one of the runes from it," Prue said. She looked at Niall. "Your father probably would have signed it with his

own special rune, right? So you'd know it was really from him?"

"I suppose so," Niall agreed, shrugging.

Phoebe was already rummaging in the desk for a pad and a pen. She held them out to Niall. "Draw Merlin's rune right here," she directed. Then she turned back to Prue. "What else?"

"To find Mrs. Jeffries, we need something of hers, or something that she touched," Prue said. She tapped her chin, thinking. After a moment, her face lit up. "I know! Are there any of those strawberries left in the fridge?"

Piper opened the small refrigerator and peered inside. When she straightened up, she was holding a small basket woven of thin strips of wood. A single, bruised, discolored strawberry sat in the bottom. "I never thought our disgusting habit of never throwing out old food would actually pay off one day," she commented.

"This is Merlin's rune," Niall announced. He held up the pad. Phoebe peered at the symbol on it. It looked like one of those elaborate graffiti that decorated the steel shutters on the storefronts in the Tenderloin back home, she thought.

Prue arranged the rune and the strawberry carton on an end table that she'd moved to the middle of the carpet. Then she brought a glass of water from the bathroom, dipped her finger in it,

and traced the outline of a pentagram around the objects. "Piper, can you turn out the overhead light?" she called.

Piper did so. Now the only light in the room came from a small reading lamp on the desk. "Okay. Piper, Phoebe, take my hands and repeat the words of the spell after me," Prue commanded. She glanced at Niall. "You might want to stand back. We're going to summon up a minor demon, and he might be kind of annoyed at being disturbed."

As they joined hands, Phoebe felt the surge of their combined powers flowing through her. She closed her eyes.

Then Prue began to chant, and she and Piper joined in.

"Like calls to like, by this ancient rule;
Dirt to dust, and gem to jewel.
We call upon thee, O great Maklik
To hear, and show us what we seek!"

Phoebe opened her eyes. For a moment nothing happened, and she wondered if the spell had failed.

But then steam began to rise from the watery outline on the table. A moment later a shape began to form in the air.

It was a head. A hideous, ridged head, with two small horns sprouting from its forehead. Its gash of a mouth opened in a ferocious snarl,

and Phoebe drew back instinctively. Then its voice croaked, "I hear and obey, witches."

The head vanished and another image took shape. This time it was not a head, but a building—a brick Victorian house.

"That's Diana's place!" Phoebe blurted out, astonished.

Then she fell silent, for the image was changing. It was as if they were following a video camera. It led them through the door . . . up the stairs to the third floor . . . through another door and into a living room illuminated by the soft light of dozens of candles. Phoebe bristled as she saw Diana curled up on the couch, a cordless phone pressed to her ear.

The demon's-eye view sped through the living room and to a hallway. At the end was a ladder that led up to a trapdoor in the ceiling. There the image began to dissolve.

"That must be where they're hidden," Piper said.

"In the attic," Niall said softly. He let out an exclamation in a language that Phoebe didn't recognize. "So she's had Merlin's spell up there all the time!" He strode toward the door. "I'll soon have it back!"

"Wait!" Prue called, dropping Phoebe's hand. "Niall, you can't just barge in there and take it by force. Mrs. Jeffries is up in that attic, too, don't you get it? We can't risk her safety."

Niall stopped, his jaw working. "Of

course," he muttered. "I'm sorry, I confess I had forgotten about your friend. But you're quite right." He sighed. "So what do you propose we do?"

"Prue, you could project into the attic and have a look around," Phoebe suggested. "At least we can see what we're up against."

"Good idea." Prue took a seat on the daybed. "Back in a few," she said with a smile, and closed her eyes.

But Piper had barely turned the overhead light on before Prue's eyes snapped open again.

"What happened?" Piper asked anxiously. "Did something go wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I couldn't get into the attic. There's some kind of magic force keeping me out." Prue shook her head. "Diana must have set some kind of protection spell on it."

"Well, well." Phoebe pressed her palms together and looked appraisingly at her sisters. "I hope we all brought at least one black outfit. Because I think we're going to have to do some old-fashioned breaking and entering."

Just after ten o'clock that evening, Phoebe, Piper, and Prue strode down the steps of the Trelawney Hotel. "I feel like I'm wearing a big sign that says Burglar," Prue complained, glancing down at her slim black trousers and black T-shirt with distaste.

"Oh, stop it," Phoebe scolded. "You look very

chic. Just like Audrey Hepburn in that movie where she goes to France and becomes a beatnik."

Prue rolled her eyes. "Right."

They were on their way over to Diana's flat. Niall had gone ahead to get Diana out of the way. "Do what you have to. Take her for a drink, dancing, whatever," Phoebe had told him. Keeping her voice light, she'd added, "Just promise me you won't take her for a romantic stroll along the river."

"Phoebe." He'd pulled her close and pressed a swift, forceful kiss on her lips. "Be careful, will you?"

"Piper!" A masculine voice boomed through the night, making Phoebe jump. "Where have you been?"

Peering down the dark street, Phoebe made out a portly, balding man with a bushy mustache hurrying toward them.

"Oh, no," Piper moaned. "It's Sir Andrew. Hide me!"

"Why?" Phoebe wanted to know. "Anyway, it's too late."

"Didn't you get my flowers and my note?" the man asked plaintively. "Why didn't you meet me? I waited at the restaurant for hours!"

"Sir Andrew," Piper said quickly, "this is all just a huge mistake, really. You aren't in love with me—"

"How can you say that?" he wailed. "My

darling, you are everything to me! Marry me, Piper!"

"Say what?" Phoebe gasped.

Piper sighed. "I'm really sorry, but I just don't have time for this right now." Raising her hand, she zapped him. Frozen in the moonlight, his mustache drooping, Phoebe thought he looked very much like a sad walrus.

"Come on," Piper said. She started off down the street. "We've got work to do."

"Excuse me," Prue said. From the extreme politeness of her tone, Phoebe could tell she was super-annoyed. "Don't you want to fill Phoebe and me in on this little drama?"

Piper sighed. "I thought it would have worn off by now," she said. "See, in my wildflower book, there was this section about love charms. . . ."

"Oh, no," Phoebe groaned. "You put a love charm on that poor old guy? Piper, how could you?"

"I didn't mean to," Piper insisted. "I didn't think it would really work. I mean, what are the odds? I just did it as a joke, really. Only he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all."

Prue sighed. "Well, that's one more mess we're going to have to clean up before we leave here." They turned onto the Oxford Road. "But it'll have to wait until after we deal with the Druids."

They reached Diana's building and walked up the porch steps. "I hope Niall didn't have any trouble getting her out of the house," Phoebe said nervously.

Piper tilted her head back and checked the windows on the third floor. "All dark," she reported. "They're gone."

With Phoebe and Piper shielding her from the eyes of any passersby on the street, Prue focused her power on the front door. After a moment, they all heard the quiet sound of the lock tumblers turning over. Prue turned the knob, and the door swung inward. So far, so good.

They climbed quietly up the stairs to Diana's flat. Phoebe tried the door. "Niall did his job," she whispered. "It's unlocked."

She stepped cautiously into the dark living room. There was a click behind her as Piper closed the door. She took another step forward.

She felt a pair of hands grip her arms. "Hey, Piper, or Prue, or whoever it is, let go of me!" she whispered.

Then the lights clicked on, and Phoebe froze in horror.

Diana stood facing her, arms folded, a sneer on her full lips. Behind her stood a row of men and women with watchful eyes. The Druids, Phoebe guessed, even though they weren't wearing their white robes at the moment.

But what really turned her cold was the sight

of Niall. He lay at Diana's feet. He was bound hand and foot, and a mauve scarf was tied over his mouth. On one temple was a swelling purple bruise. He was very pale.

Phoebe cast a glance over her shoulder. The hands on her wrists belonged to a tall, strong-looking man. He was holding her lightly, but she had no doubt that he'd tighten up if she tried to move. Prue and Piper were being held by two other similarly large men.

"So the little love-toy dabbles in spells," Diana said. Her eyes flicked past Phoebe to Prue and Piper. "Or is it one of your friends who tripped my magic alarm? Come on—I know one of you was snooping around here earlier. Looking for this, I'm sure." She held up a scrap of parchment, nearly black with age.

Phoebe bit back a gasp. Merlin's spell! There it was, so close she could almost touch it.

"Yes, that's right, I've had it all along. I was going to give it to Niall after the ceremony tomorrow." Diana scowled. "But now I've changed my mind. I think he—and the three of you—need to learn a lesson."

Flames suddenly blossomed from a red plastic lighter from her left hand. Phoebe's heart skipped a beat as she realized what was about to happen. "No!" she cried, lunging forward. The hands on her wrists yanked her back. "Diana, don't!"

But it was too late. Diana had already

touched the flame to the bit of parchment. It flared brightly—and then it was gone.

"Old sheepskin burns very quickly," Diana observed, watching the ashes sift to the floor. She bent down and spoke to Niall in an icy voice.

"I have the spell in my head," she said. "But that's the only place it exists now. Do you understand me?"

Niall nodded, his eyes dull with despair.

Diana looked up at the Charmed Ones. Her green eyes were hard.

"The only way you can save him now is to stay out of my way," she stated. "He does what I want him to do—or tomorrow at the stroke of midnight, he dies."

CHAPTER 8

Phoebe didn't stop to think. She was too furious, and too frightened. She simply stamped her foot down, hard, on the instep of the man who was holding her wrists.

He let out a howl and dropped her arms. Phoebe whirled and planted her fist in his solar plexus. It was a move she'd learned in a self-defense class she'd taken back in San Francisco.

He doubled over. Phoebe was already past him, aiming a kick at the man who was holding Prue. Looking startled, he raised his arms to defend himself. Next to him, Piper was struggling with the man who held her.

The room was in an uproar. Everyone seemed to be yelling and thumping things. "Get them!" Diana's voice shrilled over the chaos.

"You bloody idiots, they're just a bunch of girls!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Phoebe saw Prue raise her hands. She's going to zap them! Phoebe realized. Then, suddenly, Prue was falling. She hit the floor and lay there, unmoving.

"Prue!" Phoebe screamed.

And then, even more suddenly, the room was completely silent. Everywhere, people stood stock-still, frozen in the middle of whatever they'd been doing. Piper! Phoebe turned around.

Piper was already crossing to Prue. She knelt swiftly by Prue's side and checked her pulse. "She's out cold, but I think she's okay," she said. Then she glanced up at Phoebe. "Sorry. I would have zapped them sooner, but that goon wouldn't let go of me."

"Soon enough," Phoebe said with a shaky laugh. "Come on, let's collect Niall and Mrs. Jeffries and get out of here before they start moving again."

"Don't worry," Piper said grimly. "I won't let that happen."

Sidestepping a motionless Diana, Piper quickly unfroze Niall, and Phoebe cut his bonds with a kitchen knife. By that time, Prue had come to. She moaned and felt the back of her head.

"Remind me not to let anyone do that to me again," she said. "Oooh, I feel sick."

"We'd better take you to a hospital," Piper said. "You could have a concussion."

"I don't," Prue said.

"We'll let the doctor decide that," Piper said.

"They should check you out, too," Phoebe told Niall as she explored the bruise on his temple with gentle fingers. "This is pretty nasty."

Prue pulled herself to her feet. "I'm going to get Mrs. Jeffries," she announced, and headed down the hall toward the attic.

But moments later she was back, looking grim. "She isn't there."

Phoebe's heart sank. "Not there?"

"The attic is empty," Prue reported. "Diana must have moved her somewhere else when I tripped that magic alarm. Damn!" She shook her head angrily.

"As a rescue mission, this was kind of a failure, I guess we'd have to say," Piper commented. "No spell, no old lady."

"I don't think we can do anything more about it right now," Phoebe said worriedly. "Wherever Mrs. Jeffries is, I'm sure she's guarded by spells. We need to think about how to handle this."

Prue put a hand to her forehead. "I've got such a headache, I can't possible think straight."

"Hospital," Piper said firmly. "We still have time to take care of our other business tomorrow."

With some difficulty, Phoebe and Piper got Niall and Prue down the stairs. On the dark, quiet street, Piper hailed a taxi and asked the driver to drop them at the emergency room of the nearest hospital.

The nearest hospital turned out to be in Hereford, about twenty miles away. Aware of the driver's curious eyes in the rearview mirror, Prue, Piper, Phoebe, and Niall spoke in low voices.

"Well, attacking them didn't accomplish much," Phoebe said gloomily. "Diana had already burned the parchment with Merlin's spell on it. All I did is make them even more mad at us. Oh, yeah, and now they know Piper's a witch. I'm batting zero here."

"No, you're not," Piper assured her. "They'd never have let Niall go. It was the only way to get him out."

"Besides," Prue added, "that brawl actually was kind of fun for a minute." The taxi bounced over a pothole and she winced. "That is, until I got whacked on the head."

"This is all my fault," Niall said in a low voice. "I should never have gotten you into this."

"It's what we do," Prue told him. "We're supposed to help the innocent." She gave him a grin. "Although it is kind of a stretch to call *you* innocent."

Phoebe smiled in the darkness. Prue totally

believed in Niall by now, she could tell. She even liked him.

So do I, she thought. More than I would have thought possible. I mean, I've only known him for three days. But there's just something about him. . . .

A heavy weight settled on her spirit as she thought about tomorrow night. Whatever happened, it was a no-win situation. Either Niall cooperated with Diana and evil triumphed, or he died horribly. Even if he cooperated, Diana still might let him die, she realized. No, the only answer was to find a way to make sure the ceremony never happened. To send Niall back to his own time before then.

In which case I still lose him forever, she thought miserably. It isn't fair!

The taxi pulled up in front of a brightly lit building. "Hospital," the driver announced.

Phoebe paid the man and they all got out. As Prue and Piper walked up to the admitting desk, Niall took Phoebe's arm and pulled her aside.

"I want to talk to you," he said. He pushed a hand through his long hair. "Listen, I meant what I said in the taxi. I never should have brought you into this. It's too dangerous. Look what's happened to your sister already, because of helping me." He sighed. "I think you should forget about me and concentrate on rescuing Mrs. Jeffries."

"Forget about you?" Phoebe shook her head. "Are you kidding?" Feeling the strong emotions welling up inside her, she tried a smile. "Do you think I'm going to stand by and let Diana have her way with you?"

"She won't have her way with me," Niall promised. "I won't do it. But I'm lost. Even if I do what she wants, Diana has no intention of sending me back. I know her well enough to know that. She's won, Phoebe. And I won't have you or anyone you love putting yourselves in danger—real danger—for something that can't be helped." He touched her cheek gently. "I care too much about you."

Phoebe's throat was tight. "You can't stop me from trying, Niall. I won't let you go that easily. Because—because I think I'm in love with you."

Niall's gaze was impossibly tender. He pulled her close. "That makes two of us, then."

"Excuse me." The Trelawney's waiter glided up to the breakfast table where Prue, Piper, Phoebe, and Niall sat. "Is there a Mr. Oldman here?"

Niall didn't react. Phoebe nudged him under the table with her knee. "He's Mr. Oldman," she told the waiter.

"This note was left at the desk for you, sir," the waiter said. He handed Niall a cream-colored envelope.

Frowning in puzzlement, Niall slit the enve-

lope and took out the single sheet of stationery inside. He glanced at it and then handed it silently to Phoebe.

" 'See you at ten o'clock tonight,' " Phoebe read out loud. " 'I'll be waiting.' "

A leaden hand closed around her heart. The note was unsigned, but the curly monogram at the top of the stationery read DSJ. Diana S. Jones.

"She's awfully confident," Piper grumbled.

Why shouldn't she be? Phoebe thought glumly. She holds all the cards. He has to show up—unless we can find some other way to send him back to his own time.

What are we going to do?

Prue had already astral projected back to San Francisco to comb *The Book of Shadows* for a solution, but she'd had no luck. "I guess none of our ancestors ever faced this particular problem," she'd said when she returned.

Phoebe gazed around the table. Piper looked all right, though worried. But Prue was pale and heavy-eyed, and Niall's bruise had darkened so that it looked worse than it had the night before. He'd spent the night rolled in a blanket on the sitting room floor. Phoebe had tried to make him take the daybed, but he had refused. "Even your floors are more comfortable than the beds in my own time," he'd told her with a smile. "No fleas."

Phoebe sipped her coffee, wincing as the liq-

uid burned her dry throat. "I'm going to go back to Caer Wydyr and look through every single spell book they have there," she said.

"Good plan," Piper said. "There's got to be something we're missing."

"Right," Phoebe agreed. But inside she felt like screaming. Even supposing that she could find a few spell books that weren't in Latin, what were the odds of finding what she needed in just a few hours? It was hopeless!

Prue had said little during the meal. Now she cleared her throat. "I have an idea," she said quietly.

Everyone turned to her. "What? What?" Phoebe asked.

Prue leaned forward. "We don't know how to send Niall back in time," she said. "But we do know how to send ourselves. I still remember how, anyway." She glanced around the table. "What if one of us was to go back and get the spell right from Merlin himself?"

Phoebe gasped. "Prue, that's brilliant!"

"And *very* risky," Piper said flatly. "We all know the dangers of time travel. Just one slip and we could totally change history. We could blink ourselves right out of existence."

"I know the risks," Prue replied. "But I don't see that we have any choice. Weigh the risk against the certainty that Niall—and probably Mrs. Jeffries—will die if we don't do this."

Piper nodded. "You're right. I guess I just

want to make sure we all understand what we're getting into."

"I don't like it," Niall said. He looked unhappy. "It isn't right that you should all be endangering yourselves for me."

"Oh, be quiet," Phoebe told him. "You don't get a vote." She turned to Prue. "You can't go alone. If something happens to you, you could get stuck there forever. Someone has to go along to watch your back."

"Ahem." Piper raised her hand. "That would be me, I think. No offense, Phebes, but you're the only one without an active power. If anyone gets into a jam back in the sixth century, your visions aren't going to help them out of it."

Phoebe saw immediately that Piper was right. Her smile took some of the sting out of her words, but Phoebe was still upset. "Someday I've got to find myself an active power," she grumbled.

Prue stood up. "Time's wasting," she said. "Let's go get ready."

Back in their room, Prue flung open the closet doors. "Take a look," she told Niall, waving a hand at the clothes inside. "Between me, Piper, and Phoebe, we've got to come up with two outfits that will pass in the sixth century."

Niall considered, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Finally he pulled out a plain, calf-length grayish green linen shift dress and handed it to

Piper. "Try this," he said. "It's a bit fancy, but I think it will do."

For Prue he chose a loose-fitting brown smock of Piper's. "We'll have to make the hem look ragged, as if the bottom of the skirt was torn off," he warned.

"Go ahead," Piper said with a sigh.

Phoebe tore one of the hotel's sheets into strips to cover her sisters' hair. "Oh, well. If this plan works, I'll be happy to pay for a sheet," she said.

"You've no shoes that would pass for even a second," Niall announced. "You'll have to go barefoot."

"Great," Prue muttered. "I hope we're going back during summer, at least."

"When are we going back to, anyway?" Piper asked. "I guess it should be as close as possible to the time Merlin disappeared. We want to make sure he's already invented the spell."

"He went into his prison at harvest time, the year before I was born," Niall said. "Just after the equinox. And I am twenty-four."

"That would make it late September, in the year 559," Phoebe put in.

Phoebe and Niall waited in the sitting room while Prue and Piper changed. "I wish I could go with them," Phoebe confessed. "I feel so helpless, just waiting back here." She sighed. "Besides, they're going to get to see Camelot. Camelot!"

Niall gave her a lopsided grin. "Believe me, it's not all it's cracked up to be," he said. "Better you don't see it; it would just depress you. Besides"— he lifted aside a lock of her hair and gently kissed her on the neck— "if this truly is my last day on earth, I want to spend every second of it with you."

"Don't talk that way," Phoebe said. Turning, she looped her arms around his neck and drew his head down to hers. "Don't," she whispered, and kissed him.

The kiss was just as intense as the first one had been. Phoebe ran her hands through Niall's hair and down his back, marveling at the shape of his muscles through his thin cotton shirt.

The sound of the bedroom door opening made them pull apart. Phoebe's cheeks were hot, and her lips throbbed where they had been pressed against Niall's. "Hey, you two, great look," she said, trying unsuccessfully to sound casual.

"A bit too clean," Niall added. His voice was slightly hoarse. "But it will do in a pinch."

"Excuse the interruption," Prue said dryly. She adjusted her white headscarf. "I think we're ready to go."

"Phoebe, I think you should stick to your plan to look through all the spell books you can," Piper said. "After all, we'll need a plan B if this one doesn't work."

"Right," Phoebe agreed. She supposed Piper had a point.

Prue and Piper joined hands. "We'll be back before you know it," Prue said, smiling. "Camelot, here we come."

Together, Prue and Piper recited the spell that would take them into the past. Phoebe watched with a heavy heart.

And then her sisters were gone.

CHAPTER 9

The first thing Piper became aware of was the smell. It was a wet smell—mud and sweat and a few other things she couldn't identify.

Sound faded in gradually. A chaos of baritone shouts and roars, mixed in with metallic clanks and clashes. What is going on? she wondered, alarmed.

Vision was the last thing to come. As with the sound, it came in gradually, like lights going up on the set of a play. Piper found herself staring through a thin curtain of rain at a sea of struggling, straining bodies. A man stumbled against her, and she had a brief glimpse of his grimy, reddened face, streaming with sweat or rainwater. He shouted something at her, but she didn't catch the words. Then he was gone.

Is this Camelot? she wondered with a spurt of panic. Or did we take a wrong turn somewhere?

"Oh, my God," Prue said in her ear. "We landed right in the middle of a battle!"

Piper nodded, dazed. She could hardly believe what her senses were telling her.

Then she heard a whirring sound. Something zipped past her left ear. She turned to see what it was—and flinched at the sight of a short-handled ax that was sunk into the tree trunk behind her. It was still quivering.

"Um, Prue?"

"What?" Prue sounded tense.

"Let's get out of here!" Piper wailed.

"Good plan." Prue rapidly scanned the area. Off to their right was a thicket of evergreen trees. "Let's head for that," she suggested.

The two sisters began picking their way across the battlefield as fast as they could, ducking and dodging as weapons came their way. Their effort wasn't made any easier by the fact that the ground was thick with cold, slippery black mud—and that their feet were bare.

"Prue!" Piper shrieked as another ax hurtled through the air. It was heading straight for her sister's back! There was no time to think. She flung up her hand and made a "halt" gesture, palm outspread.

The ax froze in midair.

"Thanks," Prue gasped. She and Piper both

stepped out of the way. "Now unfreeze it before someone notices it," she ordered.

Piper waved her hand and the ax flew on its way. It thunked harmlessly into the mud a few yards away.

They reached the safety of the trees without further incident. They plunged deep in among the straight trunks, making sure they were out of sight before they stopped. Piper leaned against a tree, panting, while Prue inspected a cut on her foot. "I'm probably going to get tetanus from this," she muttered. "I knew I should have gotten that booster shot last month."

"I didn't know King Arthur was at war," Piper said. "Niall could have warned us."

Prue's lips set in a thin, anxious line. "I wonder what else he didn't warn us about."

"Oh, well." Piper spoke with a confidence she didn't necessarily feel. "It can't be any worse than that battle, can it?"

"Let's hope not." Prue glanced over her shoulder as the roar of many voices filled the air. It sounded like some kind of battle cry. "Piper, did you notice that none of those soldiers out there seemed to be wearing armor? Or riding horses?"

Piper's brows drew together thoughtfully. Now that Prue mentioned it . . . "I didn't see any swords, either," she remarked. "Just a lot of those throwing axes and a few knives and clubs. It's all kind of, well, primitive. And dirty."

"Not much like Phoebe's stories, is it?" Prue commented. She tried a step on her sore foot and winced. "All right, we'd better figure out where we are. Come on."

They made their way out of the trees and up a small, rocky ridge. Piper gazed around her, shielding her eyes from the cold drizzle with one hand.

"Over there!" she called, pointing with the other hand. She'd spotted a stone fortress perched on the top of a hill. A few mud-and-stone huts dotted the slope around it.

Prue gazed at it. "You think that's Camelot?" she asked in a doubtful voice. "It's so . . . rugged."

"I don't see anything else that's even a possibility," Piper pointed out.

A river ran between them and the fortress, but it looked shallow and rocky. Piper was pretty sure they'd be able to wade across it.

At least we don't have to worry about getting wet, she thought ruefully. We're already soaked from this rain.

They picked their way down to the river. As Piper had hoped, it was shallow enough to wade across, though the current was so strong that she lost her footing once and went down painfully on her rear. But at last they were on the other side.

Piper looked at Prue and grinned. Prue had a long smear of mud down one cheek, and her white headscarf was soiled and bedraggled.

"What's so funny?" Prue demanded.

"I was just thinking, Niall said we were too clean for his time. Well, you aren't. Not anymore," Piper said. "You'll fit right in."

For a second Prue looked annoyed. But then she broke into a laugh. "You look pretty authentic yourself," she told Piper.

They started up the wooded slope toward the fortress. When they reached the edge of the tree line, they peeked out cautiously.

Piper was dismayed to see that the great wooden gates were closed. Four burly soldiers with long spears stood in front of them. A sentry paced along the top of the massive stone walls. "How are we going to get past the security?" she asked. "I mean, I could freeze them all. But I doubt we'll be able to open those gates on our own. They look really heavy."

"I could use my power to open them. But I don't think we should use magic unless we absolutely have to. We don't want to do anything that draws attention to us." Prue pulled Piper back into the shadow of the trees as the sentry turned in their direction. "They'll have to open the gates sooner or later. There must be deliveries coming or something. We'll wait until someone else goes in, and then sneak in behind them."

As it turned out, they didn't have to wait long. A few moments later, the sisters heard a strange creaking, rumbling sound. A heavy

wagon with big wooden wheels came into view, pulled by a team of oxen. Faint groans rose from the interior of the wagon.

The rain had let up, but now fog was creeping in. Piper peered through the thickening mist. "I think the wounded men from the battle are in that wagon. Someone's going to have to open the gates to let it in," she whispered. Then she caught Prue's arm as she noticed the knot of soldiers following the cart. "Come on! Here's our chance!"

The sisters slipped out and joined the silent, weary crowd as it straggled toward the great gates. "Keep your head down," Prue whispered as Piper sneaked a look around.

The gates swung open, and Prue and Piper passed through. Piper held her breath, but no one challenged them. Once inside, crowds of women and children surrounded the wagon, searching for husbands, brothers, sons, and fathers. In the confusion, Prue and Piper had no trouble breaking away from the soldiers.

They stood under the overhang of a thatched roof. A few bedraggled chickens scratched in the mud at their feet. Men and women bustled around them, and no one seemed to pay them the slightest attention.

"We did it." Piper let out a sigh of relief. "We're in."

"Now we just have to find Merlin," Prue said. She sighed. "Which could be kind of a

challenge. This place is bigger than it looks from the outside."

It was indeed. Now that they were inside the gates, Piper saw that the fortress was not one building, but several. There was a massive stone hall with a tower at the back; that seemed to be the main building. But smaller wood-and-thatch structures had been added onto it, like barnacles clinging to a rock. In addition, there was a long, low stone gallery that ran along the left-hand wall. It was joined to the main building by what looked like a covered bridge.

Pigs and chickens roamed freely in the great courtyard. Someone had strewn bunches of straw about, presumably to soak up the rain, but most of it was simply trampled into the heavy black mud. A few yards away from Prue and Piper, two little boys in sodden wool tunics were tussling with a skinny, mangy dog. As the girls watched, the dog pulled itself free of the boys, ran over to a small standing wagon, and relieved itself against one of the wheels.

"Well. It's not exactly a fairy-tale castle," Piper commented wryly. She glanced up at the stubby, square stone tower. "But I say we try the tower anyway. Witches and wizards always seem to live in towers in the old stories."

"Sounds like a plan." Prue began to pick her way across the courtyard, wincing as her bare feet sank into the mud. "Ugh! Let's get this over

with. I'm dying to go home and have a shower and a cappuccino."

"Yeah. This is definitely one of those adventures that I'd rather watch in the movies than actually experience," Piper said. "Another thing that I wish Niall had warned—"

She broke off as a heavy hand descended upon her shoulder. Her heart pounded as she was spun around. She found herself staring at a squat, heavyset woman of about forty whose face resembled nothing so much as a lumpy potato.

The woman opened her mouth, and Piper noticed that she had no more than four or five teeth left. Then the woman was shouting at her and Prue, and Piper could only blink in bewilderment.

She couldn't understand a word the woman was saying! It sounded something like "Hwlch y dolch greidawr mulgwyn." But that wasn't English, was it?

"I'm sorry, I don't think I caught that," Prue said politely.

"Hwlch y dolch greidawr mulgwyn!" The woman shouted the same thing again, but louder this time. Then she shook a finger in Piper's face. "Dovey diol gwr ffachynleth?"

Piper gaped stupidly at her. That definitely wasn't English, she thought. This woman must be foreign. But why is she yelling at us?

A couple of soldiers who were passing had

stopped to listen. Now one of them shouted, "Wyrdryn llangellen a pwyl y fawls!" They both burst out laughing.

Oh, no, Piper realized. They *all* speak this bizarre language. They don't speak English at all!

She stared at Prue and saw the horror she felt reflected on her sister's face. It had never occurred to either of them that they might need another language. After all, they were still in England, weren't they?

But obviously, in 583, the English language as they knew it had not yet evolved.

One more thing Niall forgot to tell us, Piper thought as the woman continued to rant at them. By now a crowd was collecting around them, jeering and pointing.

She gritted her teeth. When they got back to their own time, she was going to kill him!

Then her spirits sank another notch as something else occurred to her.

How in the world were they going to persuade Merlin to give them the spell when they didn't even speak his language?

Phoebe tore her eyes away from the spot where her sisters had stood only seconds ago. They were off now, and there was nothing she could do to help them. She'd just have to hope for the best and try to find some kind of solution from this end. She took Niall's hand. "Come on,

let's go to that bookstore," she said. "We've got a lot of reading to do.

"I wonder if we need to worry about Diana trying to capture you," Phoebe mused as they walked toward Caer Wydyr. "I mean, is it safe for you just to be walking around like this?"

"I think so," Niall said. "First of all, it is broad daylight and we're in public. I don't think Diana would dare try anything right now. Second, you read her note. She believes I've got no choice. I don't think it would occur to her that I might simply choose not to appear."

"It isn't going to come to that," Phoebe said quickly. She squeezed his hand. "You aren't going to appear because you won't have to. We'll have found a way to send you back by then."

Niall sighed. "I wish . . ." he began. Then he trailed off.

They stopped for a red light at a busy intersection. Cars and buses zoomed past them.

"You wish what?" Phoebe pressed.

Niall hesitated. "I wish I could find a way to change the doom that's on me," he said at last. "I wish I could find a way to stay here, in this time, and just live."

Phoebe suddenly felt short of breath. "You mean you like our time better than your own?" she asked. "Is that what you're saying?"

He glanced down at her. Her whole body suddenly felt hot and flushed. I can't believe I'm fishing for a declaration from him, she thought.

"That's not what I'm saying," he replied softly. "You know that, Phoebe. Shall I spell it out? I wish I could stay here—with you. That's what I'm saying."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I wish you could, too," she whispered. "Oh, how I wish!"

They reached the bookshop. Phoebe quickly dashed the tears off her cheeks. She took a deep breath and led the way inside.

She collected a pile of books, first making sure they were all written in English. Then she sat down on the floor and began paging rapidly through them, glancing at any spells she came across to see if they might help. Niall did the same.

It was a good thing this was such a sleepy shop, she thought. No one was going to question what they were doing or ask them to move out of the aisles.

The grandfather clock against the wall ticked relentlessly. BONG! Phoebe jumped as it chimed the half hour. Why couldn't they have a nice, unobtrusive electric clock? she wondered.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. Phoebe turned pages even faster. There were spells to get rid of unwanted body hair; spells to make you look younger; spells to make your neighbor's milk curdle—spells for everything, it seemed, except sending a person back in time. This is hopeless! Phoebe thought.

Fighting a sense of despair, she put down the

book she'd been looking at and opened another, a tattered little book called *Enchauntements for Alle Seysons*.

This is so lame, she thought as she flipped impatiently through it. Warding off the evil eye . . . summoning fairies . . . This is not what magic is about. Calling up a strong wind . . . nullifying curses . . . giving your enemy warts . . . Phoebe tossed the book down in disgust. She glanced at the clock and was horrified to see that almost another half hour had gone by.

No! The time was slipping away too fast!

Niall must have been feeling it, too, for he turned to her. "Anything?" he asked in a quiet but urgent voice.

She shook her head. "Not yet."

The clock began to chime. Noon. Only twelve hours left.

Phoebe's eyes widened. "Wait a second. Rewind," she said aloud. She'd just had an idea.

No. It was so incredibly simple it couldn't possibly work, she told herself. Could it?

Could it?

She sat back, staring unseeing at the shelf in front of her. The blood was starting to hammer in her temples.

Could it be that the answer to all their problems had been right under her nose all along?

CHAPTER 10

Prue shot a helpless glance at Piper. The heavy-set woman was leaning in close, yelling right in their faces now, and neither Piper nor Prue had any idea what her problem was. How in the world were they going to get out of this situation?

Abruptly the woman grabbed Piper's arm in one hand and Prue's in the other. She began dragging them toward the long gallery that ran along the left wall of the castle keep. Piper cast a what-do-we-do look at Prue.

Prue shrugged to signal that she had no idea.

The woman marched them through a low, arched doorway and down a wide hall. Prue nearly gagged at the thick stench of wet wool, grease, and unwashed bodies that filled the air.

Then they emerged into a room that could only be a kitchen. Two great fireplaces threw off so much heat that Prue felt beads of sweat pop out on her forehead within seconds. A small, skinny girl was turning a whole pig on a spit over one of the fires. A great iron cauldron bubbled on the other one.

The heavyset woman thrust them toward a long, wooden table. At one end, another young girl was chopping some kind of root vegetables—parsnips? Prue wondered—and tossing them into a big bowl. At the other end stood another big bowl. The woman pointed at this bowl, then yelled some more incomprehensible words at Piper.

Piper peered into the bowl. A moment later understanding broke over her features. "It's bread dough!" she whispered to Prue. "I think she wants us to knead it. She must think we're kitchen wenches."

"We'd better play along for now, until we can figure out how to get away without causing a scene," Prue whispered. "You're the cook—you start and I'll do what you do."

She watched as Piper reached into the bowl and pulled out a ball of dough. But when she began to reach into the bowl herself, the heavyset woman jerked her back. Shaking her head vigorously, she pushed Prue toward the middle of the table.

Then the woman took a hide sack off a hook

on the wall and shook it over the table. Four or five dead birds fell out. "Oh, ugh!" Prue groaned.

The woman pointed at the birds and said something in a commanding voice to Prue. To reinforce her order, she made pulling gestures with her hands.

"What does she want me to do?" Prue asked Piper. "Tell me she doesn't want me to touch these hideous things."

"I think she wants you to pluck them," Piper whispered. "Sorry!"

Prue felt a twinge of desperation as she stared at the bedraggled heap of birds. With those rings around their necks, she supposed they might be pheasants, but who knew? The only pheasants she'd ever seen had been already cooked and cunningly arranged on a plate with some parsley.

Well, she thought, live and learn. She picked up one of the birds with gingerly fingers and began to tug at its tail feathers.

With an impatient exclamation, the heavy woman slapped her hand away. She seized the pheasant by its neck, marched over to the bubbling cauldron, and plunged the bird in.

"She's loosening the feathers in boiling water," Piper explained in a low voice. "They'll come out more easily now."

The woman tossed the now-steaming bird back on the table, gave Prue a malevolent glare,

and stalked over to the pig on the spit. She poked at it, then snapped something at the little girl turning the spit. In response, the little girl began to turn faster. The woman watched for a moment, grunted, and then headed for the doorway.

Prue was watching her out of the corner of her eye. Is she leaving now? she thought hopefully.

No such luck. The heavyset woman lowered herself onto a wooden stool by the doorway, where she sat glaring at all her charges with implacable eyes.

"I think we're stuck here for a while," Piper whispered. She punched at her ball of dough, flipped it over, then punched it again. "Oh, well, at least she didn't accuse us of being spies or something when we didn't speak her language. What's that all about?"

Prue had wondered about that, too. She thought she knew the answer. "Well, in the sixth century the people of the British Isles were divided into lots of different tribes," she said. She tugged out a handful of wet feathers, trying not to think about what she was doing. "They didn't all speak the same language. Also, I think it was customary to make slaves of people that were captured in wars. She probably thinks we're just slaves from some other tribe."

"King Arthur kept slaves? Wow. This is *so* different from the stories," Piper commented. "So, any ideas about our next move?"

Prue sighed. "I guess we just have to keep an eye out for a chance to sneak away," she replied. "I mean, she can't sit there all day, can she?"

But the minutes sped by, and it began to seem as though, in fact, the heavyset woman *could* sit there all day. What's more, every time Prue sneaked a glance at her, the woman's beady gaze was fixed unwaveringly on either herself or Piper.

This is ridiculous, Prue thought. The heat and smell in the kitchen were starting to make her feel sick. I didn't come fourteen hundred years into the past just to spend my time plucking feathers out of dead birds!

"Okay, it's time for plan B," she whispered to Piper. "I'm going to create a distraction. Get ready to run."

Piper nodded. "Go for it."

Prue glanced around discreetly until she spotted a pebble lying on the ground near the far doorway. Focusing her power, she made the little stone rise up and knock on the stone wall.

The heavyset woman turned her head sharply in the direction of the sound.

Prue moved the pebble through the doorway, just out of sight. Then she made it knock on the wall again. She could only hope no one was out there to see it.

Frowning, the woman heaved herself off the stool and took a few steps toward the doorway.

Score! Prue made the pebble knock again.

The woman turned and shot a glance at the table where Prue and Piper were working. Prue quickly dropped her eyes to her task and tugged out another handful of feathers. As she tugged, she made the pebble knock one more time.

Muttering something, the heavyset woman disappeared through the far doorway.

"Let's go!" Wiping wet feathers off her fingers, Prue headed swiftly for the other doorway. Piper was right on her heels. Glancing back, Prue saw that the little girl at the spit was gazing silently after them. She put a finger to her lips. After a moment the little girl grinned and nodded.

Prue and Piper hurried out into the muddy courtyard, then veered left and headed toward the great hall. "Keep your head down, and don't make eye contact," Prue advised Piper. "With any luck, people will just ignore us."

But it just didn't seem to be their lucky day. They were only halfway across the courtyard when a burly, red-faced soldier stepped into Prue's path. Leering at her, he said something. Although she couldn't understand his words, she had a pretty good idea of what his suggestive tone meant.

"Uh-oh," Piper muttered.

Prue forced a smile. "Not right now, I'm on an errand," she said in as polite a voice as she could muster. "Excuse me." She tried to move around him.

The soldier's grin grew wider. He stepped

directly into Prue's path again, then grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close. Once again she was nearly overwhelmed by the smell—this time, the scent of male sweat and grime, plus the gamy odor of his leather breastplate.

"I don't have time for this!" Prue grated. Still smiling, she brought her knee up swiftly into his groin. The soldier gave a strangled yell and let go of Prue as he doubled over.

"Crude, but definitely efficient," Piper commented as they hurried on their way.

The entrance to the great hall was through a pair of tall, heavy-looking oaken doors. A smaller door was set into these. Piper pushed it open, and she and Prue slipped inside.

Prue blinked in the dimness. They were in a single immense room, its floor strewn with rushes. Rows of long tables were lined with benches. At the far end was a raised platform with another table on it, this one round. It was ringed with high-backed chairs, among them a massive carved wooden throne. Except for themselves, the room was empty.

"This must be their banquet hall," Piper said in a hushed voice. "And that must be the Round Table." She gave a slight shiver. "Wow. Suddenly it all seems more serious, somehow."

Prue nodded. "I know what you mean."

They moved forward, looking for stairs that might lead to the tower. There were several openings off to the sides, but as far as Prue could tell

from glancing down them, they seemed to lead to other, smaller rooms—sleeping quarters for the king and his lords, she guessed.

"Prue, over here!" Piper called after a few moments. Prue hastened to join her sister at the rear of the great room.

Piper had found a small door hidden behind the dais where the Round Table sat. Opening it, Prue saw that it led outside. A few yards away, the tower rose up, gray and forbidding. A doorway led into a shadowy interior.

"All right. Come on," Prue said. She and Piper ran across the open ground to the tower. Prue hesitated a moment before the doorway, feeling a sense of foreboding.

We're on a mission, she reminded herself, and stepped inside the tower.

Inside, they saw that a set of stairs spiraled up the curving walls of the tower, set into the stone. There was no banister or handhold. Torches burned in iron brackets at intervals along the way. Without them it would have been pitch-black—the tower had no windows. Prue strained her eyes, but she couldn't see where the stairs led to.

They began to climb. Prue was in the lead.

"I hope he's up there after all this," Piper said nervously. Her voice echoed in the shadowy space.

"Shhh," Prue cautioned. She stopped climbing, her senses alert. Had she heard something in the gloom above them?

She and Piper stood for a moment, listening. But there was only silence. After a moment Prue beckoned to Piper, and they kept climbing.

Prue's feet began to feel heavy. Sweat trickled down her forehead and stung her eyes. Behind her, she heard Piper's breath rasping.

Wow, this tower must be a lot taller than it looked from a distance, she thought. She forced her legs to take another three steps. Either that, or we're both seriously out of shape.

Then another possibility sprang into Prue's mind. Or there's magic at work here.

As soon as she thought that, she knew it had to be true. Gasping for breath, she raised her head and saw that a tall, gray-bearded figure in a long blue robe stood above her on the stairs. Iron gray hair waved back from a high forehead. Deep-set eyes burned down at her from under shaggy brows.

Merlin!

From Piper's sudden silence, Prue knew her sister had spotted him, too.

Before Prue could speak or even gather her thoughts, the enchanter uttered a sharp phrase. Suddenly Prue found that her feet seemed to be glued to the stone on which she stood.

Behind her, Piper let out a little cry. "Help!"

Instinctively, Prue lashed out with her mind. The force would have sent any normal person flying backward.

But Merlin merely staggered a bit. He gave

Prue a contemptuous smile and made a slight turning gesture with his right hand.

Prue gasped. It felt as if there was a giant hand inside her head, pressing down on her brain. She tried to use her power to throw it off, but she couldn't.

"Piper—he's neutralizing my power!" she whispered, panicked. She was totally helpless!

"He thinks we're trying to attack him. We've got to convince him we're not—and fast!" Piper said urgently. Raising her voice, she added, "We're not here to harm you. We need your help. Please!"

Merlin barked out a question. But he spoke the same weird-sounding language as everyone else in Arthur's court. Prue had no clue what he was asking.

"We don't speak your language," she said. "Do you have a translation spell?"

Merlin scowled and said something else.

"Don't you get it? We can't understand you!" Prue cried. She was starting to get desperate. How could everything have gone so wrong?

Merlin's expression grew even darker. He raised his left hand, and Prue saw that he held a long, gnarled wooden stick, covered with intricate carvings. Slowly he leveled the stick at Prue and Piper. He began to chant.

Prue felt a moment of cold horror. He was about to blast them into oblivion!

CHAPTER 11

"Wait!" Piper yelled desperately. "We're here to help your son, Niall. Niall!"

Merlin's voice broke off. He stood motionless, the long staff still pointing at Piper and Prue. But now his deep-set eyes held a question.

"Niall! Your son!" Piper said again. Cradling her arms in front of her, she made a motion as though she were rocking a baby to sleep.

Merlin slowly lowered the long carved staff. He took a step down the stairs. Then he said several words. Piper had no idea what they meant, but his voice went up at the end. He was asking them a question.

"We don't understand you," Prue told him. She pointed at her ear and then shook her head.

Merlin's eyes narrowed. He said something else, gesturing emphatically with his left hand.

"Oh, this is hopeless," Prue muttered. Her voice was full of frustration. "He's the greatest enchanter of all time. Can't he just make up a spell to translate?"

Merlin made an abrupt slicing motion with his left hand. Piper staggered as her feet suddenly stopped feeling glued to the floor. "Whoa!" she cried.

Merlin crooked his finger at the sisters, beckoning them on. Then he turned and swept up the stairs and through the door at the top.

Exchanging a wondering glance, Piper and Prue followed him.

As she stepped through the doorway, Piper felt as though she were entering a different world. Merlin's chamber was a riot of color. It was filled with exotic-looking objects: a silver mirror with a carved ivory frame, a tapestry of brocaded Chinese silk, an abacus, a set of beakers made from heavy blue glass. Absent was the heavy, damp chill that permeated the air in the rest of Arthur's castle. Here the air was warm and dry, and the room was bright. The reason for this was immediately obvious—at the base of each window-opening, a line of small white flames danced in the air.

"Magic heaters," Prue observed in a hushed voice. "Pretty cool."

Stacks of parchment covered in writing lay

on every surface, weighted down with wooden blocks. Some of the writing appeared to be runic, but some was in the good old Latin alphabet. Peering at the stack nearest to her, Piper recognized a couple of Latin words. " *'Rex potentiam,'* " she read aloud. "I think that means "powerful king."

Merlin rapped the parchment with his stick and rattled off another question. Piper still didn't understand him, but she caught the word *"Romani"* in there.

"I think he's asking us if we speak Latin," she told Prue. She turned back to Merlin and shook her head. "No, but you're getting warmer."

Merlin's shaggy brows drew together. He stroked his beard thoughtfully. Then he strode to another pile of parchment and began rooting through the pages, scattering them to right and left as he searched for something.

A moment later he let out a cry of triumph and held up a sheet of parchment. He peered at it for a second as if studying it. Then he sketched a series of signs in the air with the tip of his staff and uttered a long, complicated string of words.

"Wow," Prue murmured. "What a tongue-twister!"

"It is indeed," Merlin agreed.

Piper's mouth fell open as she stared at him. So did Prue's. He chuckled.

"Yes, now I understand your barbarian

tongue," he told them. His expression abruptly grew fierce again. "Now speak, witches, and tell me by what black art you know the name of my son who is not yet born!"

Piper gulped. "I guess you're a little suspicious of us," she ventured.

"You are witches," Merlin stated.

"But we're on the side of the light," Prue told him. "We are here because we're trying to help your son."

"How can he need help when he is not yet even in this world?" Merlin demanded. "My wife, Nyfein, told me only three days ago that she was carrying my son. And I have not spoken even to her of the name I have chosen for him. How can you know these things?"

Piper took a deep breath. This was the hard part. "Well, the fact is, we're from your future," she said.

"Far in your future," Prue added. "More than fourteen hundred years, actually."

Merlin stood very still for a moment. Then he arched one eyebrow. "Go on."

He's a cool one, Piper thought with a touch of amazement.

"Your son was brought into our time by an enchantment," Prue explained. "The people who brought him want to use him for their own, evil purpose."

Merlin frowned. "What purpose?"

Prue glanced at Piper. Then she described the

Druids' plan to have Niall father a child with Diana.

"They believe the child will have your power and more," Piper added. "If Niall refuses to help them, they'll let him die. My sisters and I are trying to help him get back to his own time, so that he can live and not have to do this evil thing."

"We believe you're the only one who can bring him back," Prue said. "He told us about a letter that you wrote him, in which you said that if he was ever lost in a land of strangers, you had written a spell that would bring him home again."

"Did I, now?" Merlin said. "And why would I write him a letter, I wonder? Why would I not just tell him?"

Prue glanced at Piper again. Her look was troubled. Piper felt an answering flutter of uneasiness. Did Merlin not know what his future held? Did he not know that soon he would disappear into a magical prison and never actually meet his son?

And if he didn't know, how could they possibly tell him? If Merlin learned that his life in the real world was near an end, wouldn't he do something to change his fate?

If he did, he could well change history.

"I thought you had the second sight," she said carefully.

"Ah, I understand," Merlin said softly. "You

think I know my own future. No. I do not. But I understand that you cannot tell me what is to come. Continue."

Piper let out a long breath of relief. "Well," she said, "we found the spell you wrote for Niall. The problem is, the bad guys destroyed it before we had a chance to use it."

"So my sister and I came back to your time to get it directly from you," Prue finished.

Merlin didn't speak right away. He perched on a high wooden stool in front of his writing table and laid down his staff. Steepling his fingers, he sat staring into the distance for a long moment.

At last he cleared his throat. "Tell me. What does my son look like?" he asked.

At the yearning tone in his voice, Piper felt a sudden, aching sympathy for him. "He has dark hair, and eyes the same color as yours. He's strong and handsome," she said gently. She thought of how loving Niall was with Phoebe. "And he has a good heart."

"You should be proud of him," Prue added.

"Ah," Merlin said again. He sat still for another minute. Then he reached out and drew a fresh sheet of parchment toward him. Dipping a quill into a pot of gluey brown ink, he began to write.

"Is that the spell?" Piper asked.

"Of course," Merlin replied without lifting his head. He paused a moment, quill in the air,

his lips moving as if he was working out some equation in his head. Then he started to scribble again.

A grin spread across Piper's face. She felt light with relief. They had done it! They had found Merlin, and made him believe the incredible truth, and soon they'd have the spell Niall needed to get back to his own time.

Then she thought of Phoebe, and how devastated she would be when Niall left her.

Poor Phoebe. But it couldn't be helped.

The room was silent for a while, the only sound the scratching of Merlin's quill on the parchment. Then a babble of voices outside drew Prue and Piper to the window.

Gazing across the walled compound, Piper saw that the great gates were open again. This time, in addition to the wagon load of wounded men, there were half a dozen figures roped together in a line, being guarded by a cordon of spear-carrying soldiers. A crowd was trying to push past the guards, screaming and throwing rocks at the prisoners.

"They must be prisoners of war," Prue said, staring at them. "They're all so big and blond. I wonder if they're Vikings."

"They are Saxons," Merlin said from behind them. They turned and saw that he had paused in his writing to look at them.

"Invaders from the east," he went on. "They are nothing but ignorant barbarians, and Arthur

is the greatest war leader of his time, but still, they will triumph in the end."

"Is that a prophecy?" Prue asked.

He gave a tired smile. "In a way, though not in the way you mean. No, I simply speak a truth that is clear to anyone with the eyes to see it. There are too many of them and too few of us. They just keep coming and coming. And we are tired. We have not had more than a few months of peace since . . . I can't remember when. Arthur took the throne with a vow to bring a new era, an era of peace. But even if he succeeds, it will all crumble when he is gone." He sighed deeply. "Our rule is over; our way is finished. It is only a matter of time."

Piper stared at Merlin. How could he be so calm, sitting there predicting the downfall of his own culture?

He seemed to shake himself. "But let us speak of problems we can solve," he said, rising to his feet. He held out the parchment to them. "Here is the spell you seek. I thank you for your care of my son."

Prue stepped forward and took the precious document. "Is there anything you'd like us to tell him?" she asked.

"No, though again I thank you. I believe I will tell him myself. After all, has not a prophecy told me that I am to write him a certain letter?" Merlin said with a smile. He drew another sheet of parchment toward him and

dipped his quill in the inkpot again. Then he paused, a faraway look in his eyes.

A shiver ran down Piper's spine. "Prue, do you realize what just happened?" she whispered. "Merlin never would have written that letter if we didn't tell him about it. I think we just became part of ancient history!"

"I know. Come on, let's go before we do something to mess it up," Prue replied with a smile.

Holding hands, they chanted the spell that would bring them back to their own time and place. The room began to fade away around them. Piper took one last peek at Merlin. He was bent over his writing table, his quill flying over the parchment.

And then their own hotel room faded in around them, and the sounds and smells of modern-day Hay-on-Wye.

"Wow," Prue said. She sank down on the daybed and pulled off her white headscarf. "That was intense."

"I'll say," Piper agreed. She picked up her watch from the desk. "Whoa. Almost noon. We'd better go find Phoebe and Niall and give them the news." She bit her lip. "I'm not sure whether it's going to be good news or bad news to them."

"Well, it's the best we can do," Prue pointed out. "And once Niall is safe, we're free to do whatever we have to to help Mrs. Jeffries. Let's not forget about her."

At that moment they heard the sound of a key turning in the front door. It swung open and a woman in a maid's uniform entered, pulling a cleaning cart. She stood stock-still when she spotted them, her mouth open in astonishment.

What's she staring at? Piper wondered. Then she caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror that hung by the door. She took in the flecks of dried mud on her face and in her hair, her muddy, torn dress, and her bare feet, which were unspeakably filthy.

"Oh . . . " She trailed off, unable to think of anything to say.

"Mud wrestling," Prue told the woman calmly. "We're on a mud-wrestling team back home in the States."

"We were just, uh, practicing," Piper put in.

"Right," the maid said, still staring. She backed toward the door. "I'll . . . I'll come back later, then, shall I?"

"That would be fine," Piper said. She hurried over and closed the door behind the maid. She glanced at Prue, and the two of them burst into a storm of giggles.

"I guess we'd better clean ourselves up before we go out looking for Niall and Phoebe," Prue said when they had finally calmed down.

They took turns showering, then dressed as fast as they could. Within half an hour, they were hurrying down the stairs and into the hotel lobby. Then Piper spotted a familiar, forlorn figure.

"Oh, no," she muttered. "Sir Andrew! Hide me."

He was seated in one of the hotel's overstuffed armchairs, pretending to read a newspaper, but she could see how his eyes were glued to the elevator doors. He was waiting for her. His scanty hair stood up around his head, as if he'd been dragging his fingers through it. Even his mustache looked rumpled.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," Prue grumbled. She grabbed Piper's wrist and dragged her out into the garden behind the hotel. "Come on, there's got to be a back gate out of this place. There it is, over there." She opened the gate, then paused and gave Piper a severe look. "But when we're done with this whole Druid business, you have got to find a way to reverse that stupid love charm. Honestly, Piper, I can't believe you did such an irresponsible thing."

"I know, I know." Piper hung her head, feeling incredibly guilty. "It was just one of those freak accidents, I swear."

They walked the few blocks to the Marketplace, where Caer Wydyr was. But as they began to cross the square, Piper spotted Phoebe and Niall seated at a table at one of the outdoor cafés. They were holding hands across the table. Phoebe was saying something to Niall, gesturing with her free hand.

"They look pretty happy for two people

whose lives are about to change forever, one way or the other," Prue commented.

Phoebe spotted Piper and Prue at that moment. Jumping up, she ran over to them.

"You aren't going to believe this," she burst out. "It's the most incredible, fabulous, amazing thing!"

"What is?" Piper asked, smiling. Phoebe's high spirits were infectious.

They walked over to the table and greeted Niall. Phoebe pulled up two more chairs, then sat down and seized his hand again. "We found a counterspell!" she announced.

"Keep your voice down!" Prue ordered, glancing around at the crowded square. "You found a what?"

"A counterspell!" Phoebe repeated in a lower voice.

"What do you mean?" Piper asked. "Are you saying you found some other way to send Niall back? Because Prue and I just went through—"

"No, no!" Phoebe cut her off. "I'm talking about a *real* counterspell. One that will totally nullify the consequences of Diana's spell." She glanced from Piper to Prue, her eyes shining with happiness. "Don't you get it? We can fix it so Niall doesn't have to go back to his time at all. He can spend the rest of his life here—with me!"

Chapter 12

Hold on a minute. Back up," Prue said, alarmed. "Phoebe, what are you saying?"

"The answer has been staring us in the face this whole time," Phoebe declared. "I can't believe I missed it for so long. I've been such an idiot."

"No," Niall corrected her. "You're brilliant." They exchanged glowing smiles.

"Enough mutual admiration," Prue said. "Phoebe, would you get to the point?"

A waitress came up and asked Prue and Piper what they'd like. Suppressing her impatience, Prue ordered an iced latte. Piper asked for a lemonade.

As soon as the waitress had gone, Phoebe leaned forward over the table.

"Okay, here's the deal," she said. "You know how Diana told Niall he'd crumble into dust at the stroke of midnight tonight?"

"Right," Piper said. Prue just nodded.

"Well, I started thinking, what if Niall wasn't around at the stroke of midnight? What would happen if he was somewhere else until, say, a quarter after twelve? Would the spell still work?"

Prue raised her eyebrows. She'd never thought about that.

"Anyway, I looked through a few books in Caer Wydyr," Phoebe went on, "and they all pretty much say that if you have a spell that says x will happen at such-and-such a time, it actually has to happen at that exact time, or it won't happen at all. The spell won't work." She grinned around the table. "If Niall's not around at the stroke of midnight tonight, Diana's spell won't affect him."

Piper was shaking her head. "'Not around'? Phoebe, I don't think you can just stick him on a plane to Tahiti. I mean, I guess Diana's spell *might* be limited by distance, but you can't be sure of that, or of what the critical distance is."

"I'm not talking about distance," Phoebe said. "I'm talking about *time*."

Prue's jaw dropped. She began to see where Phoebe was going.

Phoebe paused while the waitress set down Prue's and Piper's drinks. Then she resumed.

"It's so simple! If Piper freezes Niall in time right before midnight, and then releases him right after midnight has struck, he'll be fine! All we have to do is make sure all our watches are absolutely precise." She lifted a forefinger. "Fortunately for us, we're in England—land of the Greenwich Observatory, the place that sets the standard for correct time. I already called the observatory and synchronized my watch. See?" She held out her wrist.

Prue frowned, skimming foam off her latte. Thinking it over, Phoebe's argument made sense. She couldn't spot any holes in it. But still, it made her uneasy. . . .

"I know what you're thinking, Prue," Niall said to her. She glanced up and met his steady blue-gray gaze. "Phoebe already explained to me the peril of meddling with time. But I'm no more than a mere drop of water in the river of history. I have no family, no sweetheart, no parents. No one even knows Merlin had a son. And I am certainly not one of the storied knights of Arthur's Round Table. I'm a simple ship's captain; my name appears in no books or songs." His smile was bittersweet. "I will not be greatly missed or mourned."

"Whereas I, on the other hand, would miss him and mourn him a whole lot," Phoebe pointed out.

"My heart is here now. And so my home is here, too," Niall said simply.

"Phoebe." Piper swirled the straw around in her lemonade. Her voice was troubled. "I don't want to be the voice of doom, but what about your vision? The one you had our first day here?"

Prue's eyes widened. "That's right!" With all that had happened since, she had almost forgotten about Phoebe's vision of Niall and the baby.

"Don't you remember that feeling you had?" Piper asked. "That terrible sense of loss? That vision meant something, Phoebe. It was telling you something. Something about the future."

"I know. I've thought about that," Phoebe admitted. Her eyes darkened with the memory. Then her chin came up. "But my visions don't tell me what *will* happen, Piper. They show me what *might* happen if I allow it to. The future is there to be changed, if we have the courage to change it."

She leaned forward and put a hand over each of her sisters'. "Please, you guys," she begged. "I've got a chance at real happiness here. Please tell me you're with me."

Prue bit her lip. It still seemed to her that Phoebe and Niall were playing with fire. But did she really have the right to try to stop them, when it meant so much to them? And at least they were going into the future with their eyes wide open.

She laced her fingers through Phoebe's.

"We're with you," she said gently. "No matter what happens, we're always with you."

Piper nodded. "What she said."

Phoebe's smile lit her whole face. "Thanks."

There was a moment of silence. Then Prue took Merlin's spell out of her bag and handed it to Niall. "I guess you won't be needing this after all. But you might want to keep it anyway. Your father was quite a guy," she added as she thought back to the morning's adventure.

Niall took the bit of parchment and studied it for a moment. Then he rolled it up into a tight scroll and tucked it into the pouch that hung around his neck. "Thank you, Prue and Piper," he said softly. "For everything."

"Hold on," Prue objected. "This is starting to sound like one of those awards dinners where everyone gets their medals and makes their speeches. But we aren't done here yet. We still have a big problem, remember?"

"Mrs. Jeffries," Piper put in. "We've got to rescue her."

"Right." Niall looked contrite. "How can I help?"

Prue didn't have to think much about that. The answer was obvious.

"We need you to be bait," she told him. "I want you to get in touch with Diana. Make her believe that she's won, that you're going to show up for her ceremony tonight with your

tail between your legs, ready to do whatever she wants you to do."

Niall nodded. "And then?"

Prue glanced at each of her sisters. She smiled grimly. It was time to call on the Power of Three.

"We'll take it from there," she said.

"It's just on the other side of those trees," Piper said in a low voice. "There are two ancient standing stones there. I think it must be some kind of Druid shrine from way back."

"The stones are the locus of a Druid's magic," Niall said. "They are built to draw on the power of the Earth herself, to channel it and tame it so that it becomes a tool, rather than simply an overwhelming and often destructive force."

Phoebe sniffed the air. The pleasant, autumnal smell of burning wood floated faintly on the evening breeze. "They must have a bonfire," she said. She spotted an orange glow through the trees. "Yeah, I can see it."

"It's part of the ceremony," Niall confirmed. "They toss the wicker giant into the bonfire with the sacrificial victim inside."

Phoebe shuddered.

"Not this time," Prue said.

The sun had just set; the last traces of deep orange and magenta were still barely visible across the river, along the western horizon. To the east, the first stars had already made their appearance.

In single file, the Halliwell sisters and Niall crept through the thicket of oak trees, toward the clearing with the standing stones.

And then, suddenly, they were there. Phoebe's eyes widened as she took in the scene.

The bonfire blazed in the middle of the clearing, between the two standing stones. Even where she stood, Phoebe could feel its heat on her face and arms. As she watched, a white-robed woman stepped forward and tossed on an armful of branches covered with glossy green leaves. A shower of sparks leaped toward the sky, and the air was filled with a sharp, piney scent.

"That's mistletoe," Niall murmured in her ear. "One of the sacred plants the Druids use in their rites."

Phoebe nodded. Her eyes swept over the clearing, then stopped on a tall, slim figure in a robe of deep reddish orange. It was Diana. Her long, auburn hair hung down her back. She wore a filmy mauve shawl around her shoulders, and a scarf of the same color around her neck. She stood with her eyes closed and her face turned up to the darkening sky. Three or four women fussed around her, adjusting the robe and scarves.

Ugh! She's so theatrical! Phoebe thought. Dislike boiled up inside her. "What is with the Stevie Nicks look?" she whispered to Piper. She knew it was pointless to be catty, but it felt good.

Behind her, Prue drew in her breath sharply. "I see the wicker giant," she whispered, pointing over Phoebe's shoulder. "There, on the right."

Phoebe followed the direction of Prue's finger. At the far edge of the clearing stood a huge, hulking construction. Two white-robed men stood in front of it, guarding it.

Made of woven branches with the leaves still on, the giant was shaped roughly like a human body, with two stubby legs and a barrel-like torso. It had no arms or head. Nevertheless, to Phoebe it seemed to radiate a sort of sullen malevolence. In spite of the warm June air and the heat of the bonfire, she shivered.

"Mrs. Jeffries must be inside that monstrosity," Prue muttered. "I bet she's completely and utterly terrified, the poor thing."

Phoebe had been holding Niall's hand. Now he gently withdrew it from her clasp. "I think it's time to finish this," he said. He turned to Piper. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "Just give me a second to get around to the wicker giant. Then all you have to do is keep them distracted for two or three minutes while I freeze the guards and get Mrs. Jeffries out." She turned and started working her way quietly through the trees toward the other side of the clearing.

Niall glanced down at Phoebe. "Be careful," she told him, and pressed a swift kiss on his lips.

He touched her cheek, then strode forward, out of the shadow of the trees.

As he entered the clearing, a tense hush fell. Even the crackling of the fire seemed to fade in intensity. Diana opened her eyes. As she spotted him, a slow, triumphant smile curled the corners of her mouth.

"I'm here," Niall announced in a defiant voice.

"Obviously," Diana drawled.

He scowled. "Before I agree to do what you ask of me, I want guarantees from you. How can I be sure you'll carry out your side of the bargain?"

Diana laughed. "Dearest Niall, are you really in any position to ask for promises?" She stepped forward and ran a finger down his cheek in a coy gesture that made Phoebe bristle. "I hold your life in my hands, remember?"

"I can see Piper," Prue whispered in Phoebe's ear. "She's just frozen those two goons who are guarding the wicker thing. Now she's trying to figure out how to get it open."

Phoebe nodded, her eyes still on the scene by the bonfire.

Niall knocked Diana's hand away. "What you say may be true," he said, "but I have something you want, too. Something you want badly."

"Oh, ugh," Phoebe muttered. "I don't want to think about that!"

Diana's smile slipped for an instant. Then it was back. "Niall, darling, don't you know that I have a dreadful crush on you?" she cooed. She put both palms against his broad chest. "Of course I'd never let you die in that horrid way."

Niall put his hands over Diana's, but he didn't push them away this time. "Tell me why I should believe you," he asked. But there was a softer, more intimate note in his voice.

Phoebe's fists clenched unconsciously by her sides. "Easy, Phebes," Prue whispered, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Piper just needs one more minute."

"A minute is just about how much more of this I can take," Phoebe muttered.

Then a flicker of movement by the far side of the clearing caught her eye. She squinted through the gloom. Her heart beat faster as she saw Piper half leading, half supporting a white-haired woman in a blue housecoat. As if sensing Phoebe's gaze, Piper turned and gave a thumbs-up. A moment later she and the woman slipped into the shelter of the trees.

"She's ahead of schedule," Phoebe whispered. "You go, Piper!"

"Okay. We're on," Prue said. "Ready?"

"And how," Phoebe agreed.

She and Prue stepped forward into the firelight. "Wow—a cookout? Hope you saved some marshmallows for us!" Phoebe called.

The white-robed Druids stared at her in con-

sternation. These poor people—they're just human sheep, Phoebe thought.

Then Diana was shouting, her face twisted with anger, "You stupid amateurs! I've had enough of your interference!" She aimed a finger at Prue and Phoebe. "Will somebody bloody grab those two?"

Three of the Druid men obediently stepped forward.

"I don't think so," Prue said. With a flick of her hand, she sent them flying through the air.

Diana's eyes widened in shock.

"That's right," Phoebe called to her. "We're actually pretty good, for amateurs!"

"Get them, you idiots!" Diana yelled. "Get them before they ruin everything!"

A few more of the men stepped forward, though their faces were terrified and their movements halfhearted. Once again Prue sent them flying.

"Prue! Phoebe! Behind you!" Niall yelled.

Prue and Phoebe spun around. Four more men were rushing at them from the woods. But suddenly they froze in place. Piper stepped out of the woods, dusting off her hands. "Anyone else want a time-out?" she asked.

Phoebe grinned. "Cute!"

She turned back. The remaining Druids were scattering out of the clearing as fast as they could, their faces blank with terror. But where

was Diana? Phoebe's gaze sharpened with concern. Diana was dangerous. They couldn't let her escape.

Then Phoebe caught sight of her. Diana had retreated until her back was against one of the standing stones. Arms raised, she was chanting something in a low voice. The stones were starting to glow green.

"Prue," Phoebe called urgently. She pointed at Diana.

Prue shook her head. "Some people just never learn, do they?"

She thrust out her hand toward Diana, fingers stiff. Phoebe gasped as Diana's long scarf began to writhe like a snake. It twined around one of her arms and began to slither up it. Then it was sliding around her wrists, binding them tightly together.

Diana's chant broke off abruptly. She stared in horror at the writhing scarf. She opened her mouth to scream, but Prue made her mauve shawl whip up and gag her. Mute and helpless, Diana could only glare her hatred at them.

Phoebe let out an admiring whistle. "Prue, that was downright artistic!"

"Amazing!" Niall called.

"Thanks," Prue said. She glanced around. "Everything okay on your end, Piper?"

"Fine," Piper replied. "Except that Mrs. Jeffries is probably losing it right now after see-

ing what we did." She shook her head. "Poor lady. She's been through a lot."

"Maybe we should put a little harmless forgetting spell on her," Phoebe suggested. She put her hands on her hips and gazed around the now-quiet clearing. "This probably isn't the kind of thing she'll want to remember."

Prue nodded. "That's for sure. But there's something else we need to take care of first." She pointed to the standing stones. "Those things can be very dangerous if the wrong person learns how to control them. I think we'd better make sure no one can use them—either for good or evil."

Niall took Diana's arm and pulled her away as Prue, Piper, and Phoebe walked up to the great stones. Phoebe gazed at their scarred, lichen-covered surfaces. Though they were made of rock, they seemed almost alive to her. She could feel them as twin dark, brooding, ancient presences in her mind.

The Charmed Ones joined hands. Slowly, Prue began to chant a cleansing spell from *The Book of Shadows*. Phoebe and Piper joined in. Their voices rose over the crackle of the bonfire as they came to the last lines of the spell:

"In this place, upon this night,
Cleanse these stones, bring them back to light.
By the Power of Three, bring them back to light!"

Crrrrrraaaaaaakkkkk! With a rending sound, a long, dark crack appeared down the center of each stone. Two pillars of sickly greenish light streaked out, stabbing up at the sky like accusing fingers.

Then the light began to fade. Slowly, slowly, it died away. The three sisters watched in silence as the long cracks in the stones closed themselves up.

In a few minutes it was done. The standing stones looked exactly the same as before. But Phoebe thought she sensed a difference in the presences. The darkness had lifted. The brooding feeling had given way to something more serene.

"Well," she said after a moment. "That's that, I guess."

She glanced at her watch. It was only a little after ten o'clock. Still two hours before Piper had to freeze Niall.

She walked over to where he stood by Diana. With the destruction of the stones, Diana seemed to have lost all her fight. She huddled on the ground now, limp and frightened-looking.

Phoebe slid her arms around Niall's waist. "We did it," she said.

He smiled down at her. "I find I'm quite looking forward to the next fifty or so years with you," he said softly.

Fifty years. Boy, did that sound great.

Phoebe held her mouth up to his for a kiss. Her eyelids fluttered closed.

And then, as their lips met, a vision slammed her. Her whole body jerked rigid. Her eyes snapped open.

"No," she gasped. "No!"

CHAPTER 13

Grainy, jerky images paraded relentlessly in front of Phoebe. The Marketplace at Hay-on-Wye, but instead of the upscale cafés and shops Phoebe was used to, it was filled with beggars and dirty, skinny children selling cheap knick-knacks. Mrs. Jeffries's whitewashed cottage, now a sagging ruin with a pile of rusted car parts where the lovingly tended garden had been. The Trelawney Hotel—gone completely. In its place was a weedy lot bisected by a stream of dark, oily water.

Then the scene switched to San Francisco, but a San Francisco that, apart from its steep hills, was almost unrecognizable as Phoebe's home. There was no color anywhere. The houses were all painted stark white. The people all wore

black. The street signs and billboards were all in Spanish.

Like an avant-garde film, the vision swooped in on the great cathedral at Washington Square. Phoebe saw its familiar white façade. Then the view widened to include the square itself, where a crowd watched as a black-robed priest solemnly supervised the flogging of a man. The man was spread-eagled between two posts. Phoebe could hear the sickening crack of the whip snapping against his raw flesh.

"No," she gasped. "No, stop it!"

"Phoebe. Phoebe!" Gradually she became aware of hands shaking her, of a voice calling her name.

She opened her eyes. Niall was gazing down at her, his brow furrowed with worry. Behind him she glimpsed Piper and Prue.

"What happened?" he asked. "It's just like when I first met you." His eyes widened with a sudden realization. "Did you have another one of your visions?"

Her mind was still spinning, all she could do was nod.

The vision was connected to Niall, that much she knew. That's why it came when she touched him. But what did it mean?

She felt a slow dread creeping over her. Did she really want to know?

"Phoebe, what did you see?" Piper asked.

For a moment Phoebe was tempted to

answer, "nothing." But she knew her sisters would never believe that. Besides, as a Charmed One she had an obligation to the truth.

So she swallowed hard and told them all about her vision. When she finished there was a long silence.

"I just don't get it," she said. She felt as though her voice was a little too loud, but she couldn't help herself. She saw Prue open her mouth to speak, and rushed on. "I mean, I know what you're thinking, Prue. You, too, Piper. It's obvious. But come on, what does Niall being here in our time have to do with anything? How could his presence possibly turn Hay-on-Wye into a slum town? Or San Francisco into a city that looks like it's being run by the Spanish Inquisition?"

"Phoebe," Prue said in a gentle voice. "Maybe it's not his *presence* that's the problem."

Piper stepped forward and put a hand on Phoebe's arm. "Maybe it's got more to do with his *absence* in the past."

"You mean, I've changed history by not going back?" Niall asked slowly.

Prue nodded. "That's what it looks like."

"Maybe it wasn't you," Piper said. "As you say, you're not in any of the history books. But maybe one of your children or grandchildren is."

"No!" Phoebe burst out. She stamped her

foot. "No, no, no! There could be a thousand other explanations. I'm sorry, but I'm not just going to lie down and accept this one. I'm not!"

She could feel Prue and Piper gazing at her, but she didn't look back at them. She knew what she'd see in their eyes: Pity.

"Diana did research on my lineage," Niall said suddenly. "Apparently she had to, in order to create the spell that brought me here. It's all there, at her flat." He gave a slight, crooked smile. "I never looked at it because I didn't want to see how insignificant my life really was. But now I suppose I'd welcome insignificance."

Phoebe glanced down at Diana. She returned the look with a sullen glare.

"Let's go," Prue said.

Half an hour later they were gathered in Diana's small study. Prue had taken Mrs. Jeffries home and put her to bed with a forgetting spell on her. In the morning she'd wake up with no memory of what had happened to her during the last two days.

Diana lay on the couch in the living room; Piper had cast a sleep spell on her so that Niall and the Charmed Ones could work in peace.

"Here," Niall said. He handed a slim folder to Prue. "That's it—my life, according to Diana."

Prue took the folder and flipped through it. There were several pages covered with Diana's bold, looping script. "It looks like she found a

Web site that traces the genealogy of prominent Welsh families," she commented as she scanned the notes. "You're not so insignificant after all, Niall. Apparently you married and had four daughters."

Phoebe made a little choking noise. Prue glanced up at her.

"I'm okay," Phoebe said quietly.

Prue nodded and returned to the notes. "According to Diana's research, your oldest daughter, Gwyneth, married the local lord, Rhys of Penarth."

"The son of my foster brother Idris!" Niall exclaimed. His eyes softened. "He's a good lad, if a bit wild."

"They had two sons," Prue went on, turning to a fresh page of notes. Then she frowned. Something wasn't making sense. "But one of them died when he was nine years old—and the other entered a monastery in the year 617. Rhys's line ends there. The Penarth lands went to Rhys's sister and her family."

"So Niall doesn't have any descendants through Gwyneth," Piper said. She frowned. "What about one of the other three?"

Prue skimmed rapidly over the remainder of Diana's notes. "Diana couldn't find any record of what happened to them," she said, feeling frustrated. "Only Gwyneth—I guess because she married nobility."

"So." Phoebe leaned back against a file cabi-

net and folded her arms. "We're still no closer to having a clue. Now what?"

"Phoebe, I know it's horrible," Piper said gently. "But we have to face facts. Even if we don't know exactly how, we can be pretty sure that keeping Niall here *does* alter history. I mean, that's clearly what your vision was about."

"Don't say that," Phoebe said. Her voice shook. "I know what it looks like. But I want something more definite. If he really does have to go back to his own time, I want to know *why*."

Prue bit her lip. Phoebe looked close to tears, and Prue couldn't blame her.

"Let's try it from a different angle," she suggested. "Okay, what was there in Phoebe's vision that was different from our reality? Maybe if we can figure that out, we can sort of work backward and figure out what caused it."

"*Everything* was different," Phoebe muttered. "San Francisco looked like medieval Spain, and Hay looked like Calcutta."

"Well, California was originally colonized by Spain," Piper pointed out. "Maybe they managed to hang onto it somehow, instead of losing it to the Americans."

"Right." Prue nodded, her eyes narrowing as she thought. "But how would that happen? And how does it tie in with what Phoebe saw here in Hay? There has to be a common thread."

Niall had been listening silently all this time.

Now he cleared his throat. "Did not England also colonize America?" he asked. "I read about it in one of the history books Diana gave me."

"That's right," Prue told him. "So?"

Niall shrugged. "Well, perhaps something went wrong with England," he suggested. "Something that made them lose their wealth and power."

"You're right. That would explain both the terrible poverty here in Hay and the Spanish presence in San Francisco. Maybe England simply didn't have the resources to colonize the new world." Prue felt a prickle of excitement. "And the source of both England's wealth and her power during the age of empire was the sea. Between the Royal Navy and the various merchant fleets, like the East and West India companies, England's ships totally controlled the oceans."

"So if something happened to England's ship industry," Piper said slowly, "then England might never have become a great world power. Wow—that's pretty wild."

"Niall is a sea captain. He lived on the coast. It would make total sense if at least one of his descendants was also a seaman," Prue pointed out. She was starting to get that buzz that happened sometimes when she got a good lead on an antique. They were on the right track—she had a feeling.

"Yeah, but we're still at square one. Even if

you're right, and this does have something to do with the English ship industry, how will we ever figure out *what?* It could have been anything!" Phoebe slapped her palm down on the top of the filing cabinet in frustration.

"Not necessarily," Prue said. She reached down and punched the On button on Diana's computer. Time for a little on-line research. "There were a few really key moments in maritime history. One of them was the Spanish Armada."

"The what?" Niall asked.

"The Armada," Phoebe explained. "It was a huge fleet of ships sent by Spain to attack England in 1588. They were trying to invade England to place the Spanish king, Philip, on the English throne. But the English managed to beat them off."

"Right." Prue managed not to sound surprised. Phoebe might not seem like the scholarly type, but by now Prue knew that there was a lot more to her youngest sister than her slightly flaky presentation might lead you to believe.

"If Spain had managed to conquer England, they would have been the dominant sea power," Prue added, seeing that Niall and Piper still looked blank. "History probably would have been completely changed from that time on."

"But mainly what happened with the

Armada was luck, or chance, or whatever you want to call it," Phoebe argued. "Half their fleet was crippled by storms before they ever got to England, and the other half got wrecked off the Irish coast when they were trying to regroup. Even if Niall's great-great-great-grandson a hundred times removed was Sir Francis Drake himself, I don't think it would have mattered. The English didn't beat off the Armada because they had great commanders. They just had better luck."

"Are you so sure it was luck?" Prue asked. She looked around at the other three. "Remember who Niall's father is."

Piper gasped. "Are you saying that there might have been magic involved in the defeat of the Spanish Armada?"

Prue shrugged. "I'm saying it's a place to start looking." She scanned Diana's computer screen and clicked on one of the desktop icons. A moment later she was online. She typed in "Spanish Armada" and hit the Search button.

Phoebe and Piper leaned over her shoulders as the computer searched. A list of Web sites popped up. Phoebe groaned. "Those are the first ten of seven hundred and ninety-six sites. We're going to be here forever—and we don't even know if we're on the right track!"

"It's past eleven," Niall added. "We'll need to hurry if I'm not to become a pile of ashes at midnight, too."

Phoebe turned and hugged him fiercely. "Don't talk like that. Even if you're only joking."

Prue was already scrolling through the first of the sites. It was a history Web site. She shook her head as she scanned paragraphs of dry text. She didn't want to say anything, but to herself she admitted that Phoebe had a good point. They didn't even have a name for Niall's hypothetical descendant. How were they ever going to find him, assuming they were even looking in the right place?

She clicked on the second site. More text. Sir Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham, led the British navy against the Spaniards. . . . She clicked on his name, which was highlighted. Could he have been Niall's descendant?

It didn't seem likely. Nottingham was all the way over in the East Midlands, in the middle of the country, and the Howard family had lived there for centuries.

The third Web site Prue opened was an online art gallery, apparently put together by an amateur history buff who had a special interest in the Spanish Armada. " 'World's only collection devoted entirely to representations of the Armada and its key players,' " she read aloud.

"Sounds like a crank," Phoebe grumbled.

"Let's have a look." Prue clicked on one of the pictures, a portrait of Sir Charles Howard.

The scene that slowly assembled itself on the

screen showed a thin man with pale eyes and wispy straw-colored hair, seated in a carved wooden chair with a high back. He wore a blue velvet doublet under a brown furred coat. On his head sat one of those Elizabethan hats that, to Prue, basically looked like a velvet throw pillow.

It was a family portrait. On Sir Charles's left sat his wife, a dark-haired woman who held a baby in her arms. At the couple's feet were three more small children and a couple of majestic-looking dogs.

Prue was about to move on to the next Web site when Phoebe gasped.

Prue spun around. Phoebe stood there, her hand pressed against her mouth, her eyes wide with shock.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. "Niall, take a good look at his wife. She's a dead ringer for you."

Everyone bent forward to stare at Lady Mary. Prue took in her blue-gray eyes, and the way her hair curled back from her forehead in a pattern that was somewhere in between a widow's peak and a cowlick.

"You're right," she agreed. "Guys, I think we found Niall's descendant. Only it's not a him—it's a her."

"And she's a witch," Piper murmured. "Look at her. You can see it in her eyes—that watchful look. She's got a secret."

"Now we know the real reason why the Spanish Armada failed," Prue said. She felt goose bumps prickle her arms.

"Wait a second, guys," Phoebe pleaded. "Don't you see how thin all this is? Usually I'm the one coming up with the crazy ideas, but this is too much even for me! I mean, even if we say that this woman Mary Howard *is* Niall's great-great-great-times-a-hundred granddaughter—which is a big leap right there—how can we possibly go from there and say she's a witch and she sank the Spanish Armada? It's ridiculous! There's no evidence!"

Prue's heart ached with sympathy, but it was Niall who spoke up.

"Phoebe," he said softly. He rested his hands on her shoulders and gazed into her eyes. "You and I both know, deep down, that it's true. As far-fetched as it seems." He sighed. "From the moment we thought of the counterspell to keep me here, I've been living in this happy dream, but there was always a little voice whispering to me that it was just a dream, no more. That it couldn't last. It's wrong to use magic to change the natural order of things. That's what Diana and her crew were trying to do. And even though our motives were so different, the result would have been the same."

Tears glistened bright in Phoebe's eyes. "But I can't stand to think of you going back and marrying someone else. I don't want to lose you."

"Nor I you," he said. "But because we have loved each other, we never will."

Prue glanced at her watch. Seven minutes to midnight. She cleared her throat and took Piper's hand. "Let's give them some privacy," she whispered.

Piper nodded. The two of them quietly left the room.

They stood in the living room. Piper eyed Diana, who was stretched out on her couch, fast asleep. "What are we going to do with her?" she asked.

Prue shrugged. "Nothing. I think she's harmless now, since we destroyed the standing stones. That's where she drew her power from, according to Niall."

"Mmm," Piper said. "I guess from now on she'll really be the mystical flake her landlord thinks she is."

There was a click as the study door opened. Phoebe stepped out. She was alone.

Prue looked closely at her youngest sister. Phoebe was pale, and there were tear tracks on her cheeks. But she looked calm.

"He's gone," she said quietly. "He used Merlin's rune to send himself back. It worked."

BONG! Somewhere in Diana's apartment, a clock began to chime. It was midnight exactly.

Prue stepped forward and put her arm around Phoebe's shoulder. "We know how much it hurts," she said. "But take it from

someone who's been there. You will get through it."

"We'll help you," Piper added. She tucked her arm through Phoebe's on the other side.

"Thanks," Phoebe said. "You know, I was thinking . . . with all those daughters Niall had, there could be dozens of his descendants walking around today. Hundreds, even." She flashed a watery smile. "Doesn't it seem likely that at least a few of them are men? *Single* men?"

Prue laughed. She could see the effort the joke cost Phoebe. But at least she was trying. That was a good sign.

"That's our Phebes," Prue said. "Come on, let's get going. The night isn't over yet."

"Wait a second. What did I do with my passport? I think I left it in the room," Phoebe said. She rooted through her bag. "Oh, never mind. Here it is." She pulled out the passport, which was covered with purple powder from an open box of incense cones. "Huh. How did that happen?"

Piper hid a grin. Phoebe had been pretty quiet over the last couple of days, since Niall had gone back to his own time. But now she seemed to be getting back to normal.

Prue turned away from the registration counter in the hotel lobby. "Okay, we're all checked out and set to go," she said. "Ready, you two?"

Piper was about to nod when she heard an all-too-familiar voice. "Piper! Darling!"

She sighed as she spotted Sir Andrew hurrying toward her across the carpeted floor. "Piper, where are you going?" he demanded. "Why haven't you answered any of my messages? Didn't you get my notes? The flowers?" His voice lost its aggrieved note. "Darling, don't you know how I need you?"

"I don't believe this," Prue muttered. She sounded supremely annoyed. "Piper, I thought you were going to take care of your little problem."

"I am," Piper assured her. Reaching into her backpack, she pulled out a plastic shopping bag. As she opened it, a garlicky, slightly putrid odor wafted out.

"Oh, gag me," Phoebe gasped. "I hope I'm not sitting next to you on the plane. What *is* that?"

"An antidote," Piper said. She reached in and pulled out a straggling bouquet, made up of various ugly and bad-smelling weeds. It had taken her the better part of yesterday afternoon to collect them.

As Sir Andrew reached her, she held the bouquet in front of her, smiling at him. "Sir Andrew, how nice to see you," she said.

"Piper, I—" Sir Andrew broke off abruptly, his nose twitching. "Good God, what is that awful smell?"

"Oh, you mean my flowers?" Piper held the bouquet up to his face so he'd get a good whiff. "Unusual, aren't they?"

He took a step backward, coughing. Piper followed, crossing her fingers. Now came the test.

"Sir Andrew, I'm so sorry I haven't returned your calls," she said. "It's just that I've been . . . well, a little overwhelmed. I mean, I'm just a simple American girl, and you're a, well, a—" She trailed off. What *was* Sir Andrew? An earl? A count? She had no idea.

"Anyway," she hurried on, "What I want to say is, if you still want to pursue our romance, well, I'm very, very interested. And I'd simply *love* to have dinner with you tonight." She fluttered her eyelashes at him for good measure.

She watched as a baffled expression spread over Sir Andrew's blunt-featured face. It was quickly followed by a look of alarm.

"Yes, well—hoom, hahm." Sir Andrew's cheeks were slowly turning brick red. "Matter of fact, what I came to say is, er, um . . . I've been called away. Urgent family business. Leaving town this very afternoon, in fact." He cleared his throat. "Wanted to wish you a bon voyage and all that."

"Oh." Piper lowered her gaze, pretending to be disappointed. But in reality she was avoiding Prue and Phoebe's eyes. She knew if she looked

at either of her sisters she'd burst out laughing. The antidote had worked.

"All right," she said in a sulky voice. "I get the picture." She had to restrain herself from adding, "You men are all alike." That would have been laying it on a little too thick.

"Yes, well. Er—good-bye, pleasant journey, what?" Sir Andrew turned and hurried away.

"Is he gone?" Piper asked after a moment. She was still afraid to look up.

"He's gone," Phoebe said. "Neat, Piper," she added in an admiring voice. "Very neat."

"Thanks," Piper said with a grin. Walking over to the nearest trash can, she dumped the smelly posy. "Whew. I don't know how much longer I could have taken that smell."

Prue was shaking her head, laughing. "You know, it's hard to believe some of the fixes we get ourselves into," she said. "We'd have to change all the names, of course, but someday one of us is going to have to write a book."

"Emphasis on *someday*," Phoebe said. "When we're old and gray and have lots more adventures under our belts. But right now I think we need to focus on living a little."

"Sounds good to me," Piper said. She linked an arm through each of her sisters'. "Come on, let's go home."

About the Author

ELOISE FLOOD has written a number of books for children and teens, as well as *Star Trek Next Generation: Chains of Command* (with William McCay), which was a *New York Times* bestseller. She lives in New York City.

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